

# The Tale of The Fallen Sakura

by toshimi-senpai

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Summary: Sanosuke Harada had brought a wife to his home in Ishigaki. Decided to resign from the Roshigumi, he settled in his village as the Village Chief. Being told that his wife is an oni who had once guarded the Yukimura clan 150 years ago, will he meet his 'dead' wife again when he was forced to join back the Shinsengumi?

## 1. The Drenched Blade

Title: The Tale of The Fallen Sakura

Synopsis: They strike when it's dark, before they rip your neck. Even one of them is worthy, to send the entire army to hell. They have never been caught, except when they surrender. And once they did, beware, there soon will fall disaster. They have reawakened, at last, each holding secrets within. All the emotions are feigned, because they're the one they called, The Assassins.

Character: Sanosuke Harada x OC (Toshimi), Kimigiku x Shinpachi (make their first appearance in Chapter 19; Stripping Your Defenses) and still in-planning; Chizuru x Kazama but not yet make their appearance together)

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><p>(Few months before their encounter with Chizuru)<p>

Screams of agony hovered over the black clouded night. The townspeople were running away from the flame gulping savagely their home. The bright color of the flame floodlight the dark night, yielding a heavy large of black thick smoke into the air.

At the very center of the aflame province, few men armed with swords on their waist and one who wield a spear in his hand had gathered for a breakneck meeting. "Save as many people as you can. We will meet back again at the temple by the river at the morning." Kondou, the Commander of the lordless samurai ordered his boys to help the villagers that were still trap in the burning house. They nodded in assent before scattered away throughout the blazing province.

The owner of the violet eyes were searching high and low for a place to help, she quickly approached one of the collapsing blazing house on the two o'clock vector, her slippers made a shriek sound, stopping her pace, when suddenly a thought hit her head hard. She began to turn away and make haste for their burning compound up far in the north alley.

Sano whirled his head to her direction when his ears caught the sound of running pace, "Toshi-" His scream caught in his throat, thwarting his intention from stopping her from going back to their blazing compound as he saw an old woman collapsed on the ashes ground few meters away from him. He rushed for her aid and carried the old woman to the safe place. And there were few more villagers which seeking for shelter everywhere. He quickly escort them to the temporary shelter. It almost took an hour to guide them back and that escalated his frustration.

And of course by the time he looked back to the direction of their blazing compound, she was no longer there, even her tracks were heavily covered with layers of black ashes.

\* \* \*

><p>The morning ray striked upon them on the vast yard of the temple, despite of the tranquilizing atmosphere of the holy place, the hustle and bustle of the injured had not ceased since last night.<p>

In the middle of the chaos, there stood a man with well-toned figure, his eyes frantically searching for someone among the human flood, his violet eyes narrowed to slits when his patience gauge had reached its peak.

"Where the hell is Toshimi?!" His voice thundered, unconsciously disturbing the resting people at the place.

One of his young captains, Heisuke, stepped out from the crowd, his face himself was as anxious as the Vice-Commander.

"Sano-san said he will be back to fetch her." He said as he stood right in front of the frowning man, a feeling of troubled and guilt overwhelmed him since an hour ago when the captain of tenth division forbid him from following him to search for the missing physician.

"To fetch her? Where the hell is she?!" Hijikata stormed off with godly pace to wherever his feet will bring him with the other members followed him from behind.

\* \* \*

><p>He stood there immobilized with his amber eyes wide open. A familiar figure with her back before his eyes immediately caught his

attention. The dark violet kimono had succeeded in concealing the burning red splash of blood on her torso. The trembling sword in her right hand extended to her side. The handle was dark and slippery, as if a flood of blood had deluged her from head to toes.<p>

The bloody figure tiredly but willingly turned to her back when she heard a gasp from her back, but she was unable, however, to discern the emotion within that one simple intake of breath. She brought the tip of the sword pointing sharply to the motionless person as their gazes meet.

"T-Toshimi?" The trembling male voice greeted her, alarming her that he was not an enemy.

The half lidded violet eyes inhaled a relief breath with her visage soften at the sight of him before her knees sank to the ground. He rushed to her side while supporting her shoulder. Her left hand was holding a scroll. But it no longer look like one as it was covered with mass of blood.

"I've got it." She extended her left hand to him with shallow rise of breath on her chest. He stared in disbelief to her face covered with few red lines. The unretrieved left hand slowly fall to her side with her head fall limply. As if being thrown back to reality, he hold her in his arms before realizing his hand was soaked with blood from her shoulder.

He quickly gathered her in his arms and began to run back to the temple. Beads of cold sweat smeared down his temple, his hands were as cold as ice when he was finally able to accept that the girl he was looking for was right in his arms, the sight he despise to see in any of his comrades, had happened to the one and only girl among the pack of wolves.

"Damn it!" He hissed, panic deluged him under his controlled composed face.

\* \* \*

><p>"Matsumoto-sensei! Please treat her immediately!" Sano's white kataginu was stained heavily with blood from the limp body in his arms as he called the doctor from outside of his door.<p>

"What's wrong-" The bald physician opened the door. His face froze for a while, but like always, was able to chase it away with his expertise in handling the bleeding people in his earlier twenty-four years. He called him to come in and laid her down on the tatami mat.

"Wait, is this.. Toshimi?!" The shock in him returned yet intensified. She was one of his ingenious disciple whom graduated in a very young age. He made no delay of inspecting the pulse on her wrist. Weak pulse. The furrowed on his old face deepened. The anticipation in Sano was building as soon as he saw the change on the doctor's face.

Matsumoto-sensei stripped open carefully of her outer garment, revealing her no longer white inner clothes. He tugged open the hem of her last dress, stopping its way just above her chest just to find a deep wound on her left shoulder. The white fabric he always use to

stop the flow of blood failed to tend her.

The sliding door threw open wildly. There stood Hijikata with his eyes wide before he hastily stepped in and sat on her other side.

"She has lost enough blood and she couldn't afford to lose more. Please hold her tight, I need to cauterize the wound." He explained her current situation as though he understood the desperate gaze in Hijikata's eyes.

The small consciousness she held betrayed her as her eyes snapped open sharply.

"Urgh!" She whimpered and squealed, trying to evade from the torturing hot metal rod that was searing her damaged tissues but to no avail. Both her hands were held tight by strong hands, effortlessly keeping her from squealing wildly.

"Toshimi, hang in there!"

"Don't let her fall asleep! Keep talking with her."

"Imouto, look at me!"

"Kuso! Her pulse getting weaker!"

The voices of the men hovered in the metallic scent atmosphere, trying their best to encourage her in the only way they can. The fate and luck began to spin against her, unfortunately placing her in the worst of situation; her eyes became blurry, the exclams from the men gradually dissipating from her reach.

Her eyes were shut closed.

**\*\*End of chapter 1\*\***

## 2. The Haste Vow

"This place is not for her. I'll have her to go back to Edo as soon as she recover." Hijikata crossed his arms over his chest as he contemplated her sleeping face. The other member of Roshigumi (later Shinsengumi) sat at the outside of the room as they listened intently to their leader's remarks. Souji leaned on the wall of the room with his back facing the night cold air. Kondou and Sannan both were absent in the moment.

The captains swallowed painfully the bitter explanation from the Vice-Commander, each chose to dissolved themselves in remorse of what had happen. Heisuke throw his gaze to the unusual silent of his seniors in age, he cannot say he knew what did they felt, especially Sanosuke, who was the most grim and gravely somber since the incident took place.

He started to wonder whether it was the right decision to let her go back to Edo, but he knew enough he's not one to talk when it comes to the superior Hijikata Toshizo when he speaks about his sister. It's not his place to say it and he knew it.

He too, had shouldered the guilt of letting her back to the blazing compound, because in that very night she had told him she left something very important in her burning room.

"Something very important I'd rather die to protect it." She said but he thoughtlessly pulled her away from the merciless fire to escape the burning compound.

He took a deep breath, 'It's now or never.' He thought inwardly before he stormed in, startling each man in the room and in the hallway.

"But Hijikata-san, isn't she our medical physician here?" Hijikata remained composed with his earlier posture, displaying a contrast posture than the youngest member.

"No. She wouldn't stay here any longer. We will take in Matsumoto-sensei as our new medical doctor."

"But -"

"I'm the one doing the decision here." He shot him his sharp glance thus stopping the young man's notion.

At the outside of the room, Shinpachi turned his head to Sano's direction; he was heading towards the main gate of the temple they temporarily stayed in.

"Oi Sano. Where are you going?"

It seemed he didn't bother to reply as his feet was keeping him further than his other companion.

"Somewhere."

Sano didn't even glance when he answered him, and by that simple gesture, he could tell he was blaming himself for what had happened to Toshimi. With a sigh, Shinpachi let go of his sight from his view and let him alone with his own thought.

He kicked the pebble with his foot, sent it flying into the stormless crystal clear river, producing a small ripple of water as it goes down the water with a plop sound.

The serenity of the river.

The turbulence of his heart.

What a contrast.

He was having a battle against himself. There were so much thing bothered him in each tickling second as though hundreds-no, thousands of big stones smashed him, but to no avail, he regain his previous self just to experience the same torturous as before until he can take no more.

He knew he was responsible for her injuries.

He knew he shouldn't let her go back to their burnt compound.

He knew he should be with her to fight those rogue samurai. No. He should be with her to protect her from those damnable men.

Because it is a duty of a man to protect the woman he... set his heart on.

But he failed.

And now she will be sent back home with those permanent hideous scar on her skin and in her memory.

He swallowed, thinking carefully of his next action, one that will benefit her, and her alone.

Her safety.

He stared on his left hand wrapped with the red hand gear, the forefinger, the middle finger, the ring finger..

Ring finger.

Ring.

Ring?

A placate smile arched on his handsome face, finally found the answer.

\* \* \*

><p>Few days later<p>

"Toshimi, can I come in?"

She quickly lifted her kimono to cover the bandage around her shoulder and took the sash on the floor with her right hand to tie it up on her white creamy kimono.

"W-wait up!" She was having hard time tying the delicate obi as her left hand was left hanging on her side supported by the bandage and she could hardly move it.

"Do you need any help?" The male voice echoed again from the outside. She could see the owner of the voice's hand was at the handle of the sliding door. She hastily turned away from facing the door. She could feel the heat permeated from her face.

"No. I'm fine." She couldn't hide the tremble in her words. She knew she would need some help and she knew he would come in. The sash suddenly slipped off from her cold hand and fall to the floor.

The door was opened.

He hid the grin under his composed face as he walked in and closed the door behind them. He approached her slowly although he was uncertain with his own self whether to enter or not seconds ago.

She dared not to turn and face him; the temperature from her face escalated, until she saw the hand with the red gear retrieved the sash from the floor.

"Like I said before, I'll always be by your side, be it you want it or not... just like in the vow just now." She completely froze on the floor as his voice whispered on her reddened ear.

His hands lingered around her waist with the sash in his hands. For the first time he was so closed with a woman that the sweet scent from her reached him and an unfamiliar feeling surged through him.

He knew he would smell it everyday.

His large indelicate hands dance ungracefully as he tied and tidied each fold to its place.

The inexperienced hands did it just fine on her kimono.

But she remained immobilized on her feet.

He spun her to face him but her gaze planted firmly on the floor. He lowered himself to her eye level and lifted her chin. The uncertain violet eyes met the amber eyes. For a moment they remained so close as if reading each other's feeling beyond the unspoken pupil.

Then he broke the silence.

"I know this is so sudden and I did this because I wanted to. I want to take care of you and protect you. So from now on, just let me do the worrying and fighting and you just stay in the infirmary treating the wounded, okay? I promise after all of this, I'll take you away from all of this havoc to a far quiet place to begin our new life." The reassuring and comforting words from her husband slightly comforted the wild throbbing in her heart.

But still... she don't know how to react to all of this shock.

"Emm.. what should I say then?"

The grin on his face widened on the naïve question from the young ingenious physician. He straightened his composure and took her hand in his.

"Just say nothing and let me lead you all the way, okay?"

He walked to the door with her hand in his. She knew that he saw the hesitant in her but he paid no heed to that.

She followed his pace to the outside where the crowd were already waiting for them. She stared to the callous hand that was holding hers with an unfathomable feelings brewing inside of her.

Before they arrive to greet the crowd, she silently nodded in assent with a small smile on her red lips to all that he had said before.

His vows.

His pace suddenly came to a halt. She automatically bumped her head to his back. He looked back at her with his gaze grazed over her face

then suddenly the amber eyes stopped upon her red lips.

"Don't you think you're overputting the makeup on your face?"

"Why? Is that bothering you?" She answered his question with another question.

He shrugged his shoulder and turned back then started walking, "Kinda. It made me want to take you here right now, but oh well." He glanced to her red face with his golden eyes glistened amusedly, "We have the rest of our lives for that. Now," he grabbed her hand in his, "let's not keep them waiting, shall we?"

**\*\*End of chapter 2\*\***

### 3. Stubborn Bride

\_"Are you okay, Toshimi? Are you hungry? Do you want to rest for a bit?" He asked relentlessly the little girl who had walked with him right from the morning. He can see the exhaustion on that cute little face even though she shook her head slightly, swaying her smooth black short hair to her sides.\_

She lifted her head to face her brother with a tired but a willingly smile to him, exposing a pair of dimple on her both cheeks.

"Please don't worry about me, nii-san. I'm alright." She managed this time to reply courteously, and straightening her shoulder like a proud healthy man.

As if on cue, a loud grumble sound filled the atmosphere.

Her stomach.

He instinctively chuckled amusedly on her, stopping their tracks thus placing his hand on her head while kneeling in front of her.

"You sound like a man if you say it like that, ya know. It's okay to appear weak sometimes. Here." Hijikata handed the last onigiri from his keeping to her.

They have had a long walk from the village next door and back to their own village, but only few of the medicine were sold. By using that few ryou they got, he bought two piece of onigiri on their way back.

Her violet eyes suddenly glinted gaily, and just before her hand reach the rice ball, it stopped midway. She lifted her young gaze to him.

"Nii-san, you haven't eat yet, aren't you?" Without waiting for his reply, her fingers thoughtlessly took the rice ball to meet his dried but eager mouth.

"It's okay to be weak sometimes, ya know!" She repeated back his remarks while smiling beamingly as he munched the onigiri half-heartedly.

\* \* \*



><p>A smile arched on his lips as he reminiscing his old memories with her now married little sister just this morning. He turned back from the black cloudless night sky and made his way to his own room.<p>

"You're late, nii-san." Her amused but gasping voice greeted him.

Toshimi was seating on his seat facing the table with her white face stained crimson red while she pressing her stomach, as if to suppress the laughter from erupted again. There were tears formed in the rim of her eyes. He was shocked to have her presence at his room at the moment.

"What are you doing here, Toshimi? Are you... give me that!" He quickly snatched away his haiku from her right hand while giving her his infamous cold glare.

"Ahh... You really made my day, nii-san. I should tell Souji about this new one-" Her amused words stopped abruptly upon seeing his glacial stare but the laughter on her face still didn't ceased.

"Go back to your room. Now." His eyes narrowed to slits as she daringly shook her head, denying his orders.

"You're the one who wanted me to marry him, so you go sleep with him in my room. I'll sleep here." She replied matter-of-factly as she made her way to the folded futon at the corner of the room and started to unfolded it with her single hand.

"I'd rather not if I were you. I'm sorry if my presence bothers you." She froze on the spot, stopping all movement her hands made upon that voice.

"Ah Harada. Could you please take her back to your room?" Hijikata couldn't help but to grin while he talked to his amused brother-in-law.

'Your room? That's my room!' She rebuked silently.

"So, what do you say? Should we head back now, or do you have something to talk to Hijikata-san?" He asked with sense of consideration while his amber eyes locked with hers. He somehow can sense the nervous in that face of her.

Her face.

His wife's face.

HIS wife.

'But it's not that I'm going to eat her or anything like that.' He thought amusedly.

She somehow felt irritated seeing the two men standing side to side before her, as if they had comploted this right from the beginning.

Averting her gaze from his, it met the another pair of grinning

violet eyes, she felt cornered.

"I-I have something to talk to nii-san." Her words began to stuttered.

"Fine. Talk away." The both men sat side by side, facing her standing figure.

"Well, I mean with nii-san only." She stressed out the word only a bit harder than the rest, only to meet the questioned gaze from them but a little tenser from the violet one.

"Do you understand what does it mean to be married? There will be no secret among the two of you from now on. Now spill." He demanded while his deep voice sent chill down her spine. She hate it when he came into this mode; even she won't be able to deny him.

She too have a seat in front of them as her gaze planted on the floor. She gulped once before she started.

"Can I have back the scroll?" The scroll she had protected from the rogue samurai that night.

The atmosphere became tensed all of sudden.

"What scroll?" Hijikata's voice boomed.

Disregard of the intensity of the atmosphere, she talked away.

"Please nii-san, I really need that scroll." She pleaded. Sano quickly cut in the tense conversation between the both sibling.

"Even if you wanted to, the contain of the scroll cannot be read again-"

"And do you know why? It's because it was covered with a mass of your blood from that night." He cut in Sano's words, escalating the tense in the air.

"It's alright, I can read it-"

"That's not the point, Hijikata Toshimi." Hijikata's voice raised to another level as he stressed out her full name; to stop her absurd idea of reading some strange scroll drenched with her own blood, unconsciously forgetting the fact that she is no longer one of the Hijikata.

She flinched slightly upon hearing his voice.

He inhaled a deep breath before his gaze soften.

"This is going to be a long night if you wish to continue but I don't want to ruin the night for both of you. Please, return to your room." Hijikata turned his body facing the table, giving the newlywed couple his cold back.

She knew this won't get her anywhere. For once, she forgot the prospect of sharing the room with Sano as the thing that matter the

most, is the scroll.

"The scroll... I've got it from the merchant in the town. It had something to do with this Ochimizu, the one that I mentioned to you the other day, that's why it is important to me." She insist of staying and explained the contain of the scroll even though Sano has grow impatient waiting for her at the door of the room.

"I don't want to know what is this Ochimizu all about. And please don't tell lie again. You disguised as a man and infiltrated the sakehouse again, aren't you?" He began to turn back to face her.

She gasped in surprise before her lips arched with a guilty smile, the dimple formed on her cheeks caught the attention of the amber eyes, thumping his heart slightly faster than usual.

"See? There's much more reason why you should marry off to Harada. And please stop the idea of making new ridiculous medicine using any foreign substances."

"It's not ridiculous! I just curious about this Ochimizu. That's all."

Sano rubbed lightly his temple with slight annoyance on his face as neither both sibling want to declare defeat first.

'This is definitely going to be a long night.' He thought.

He re-entered the room and extended his hand towards her.

"Let's go." She instinctively turned to Sano. But she didn't reached for his hand yet. He left his hand there for seconds.

She saw the raising brow of her brother's face, while a small wicked smile ran across his face. That much increased the irritated in her.

She slowly rolled onto her feet on her own then started to walk out of the room with a red face.

He heard a chuckle from his back.

"You'll need to work harder than that for her to have you as someone she can rely on. Good luck, Harada."

He replied with a smirk on his face.

"Don't worry. I know what should I do then."

He glanced to Hijikata in the corner of his eyes before he closed the sliding door and walked off the room to his new room, together with his stubborn bride, Toshimi.

"Don't forget what did you promised me that night." Even beyond the thin layer of the door, he can sense the seriousness of his voice from the inside.

"I'm a man of his words, I assure you."

#### 4. Quite Intriguing

She stormed off from Hijikata's room as she swallowed the rebuttal that accumulated in her throat with her face twitched slightly in disgruntlement. As she made her way to her room at the opposite side of the compound, her eyes suddenly became alert of her surrounding; her pace stopped, it was as if a pair of cocky eyes were eying her intently in each of her step.

A cold chill sent her goosebumps rose for a while.

She whirled to her back to see if someone was teasing or following her. Or maybe it could be Sano. Although she would never thought he will do as such. Then her theory was proven true.

There's no one on her back.

Cold night air was slapping her cheeks, changing the current air to become much more taunting than before.

She threw her glance all over the compound to search for the pair of eyes that were watching her, even though deeply she actually refused herself to seek for the source of the chill, but her eyes had made its move earlier than her brain could process at the moment.

It was because she had experienced the same glacial and nervewracking situation before.

"So it's you."

Her brows snapped together in befuddlement as the voice echoed deeply inside her head that it almost hurt her with frustration as no one was around to send that voice to her. Someone was toying with her. Someone... that have this ability to sneak in people's mind.

"Who is it?" She murmured under her breath as to counter the voice in her head just before.

But the voice faded as the last two words buried in her head.

Slap!

Her head turned to her side slightly as she blinked her eyes few times as she was thrown back to reality.

"Oi Souji! Do you really have to do that?! Sano-san will get you for that!" Heisuke's voice peaked upon Souji's action as his blue-green eyes glared blazingly to Souji's smirking face.

"Souji, you would need to pay with your face being slap as much as you did to her. Or more." A cold but calm voice hovered behind Souji.

"Then what should I then? She have been spaced out since couple of seconds ago. And I never thought would came across a bride in this cold night." He grinned devilishly towards her dazzled face but slowly realization washed over her face on what kind of situation she was in.

Despite of Souji's effort to stressed out the word bride much louder than the other appeared to be useless to her.

"I-I spaced out?" She didn't remember doing such but searching for...

For...

For what?

'What did I do just now?'

Disregard of the three pair of eyes were watching her, her violet pupil wildly moving as for seeking her last memory, but she didn't managed to as another voice echoed from behind her, stopping the progress of her brain.

"What's the commotion all about? And why are you still here?" Sano's hands planted high on the pillar just on her left side as he closed the gap between his body and hers with his eyes locked upon her shocked face.

She wanted to move away from the heat of his body but his another hand already gripped her right hand, knowing that she would move away from him.

Her voice stucked on her throat as the crimson stained her pale cheeks.

Saitou quickly cleared his throat upon the sight before themP.

"Please excuse us, but Souji just now-"

"That's right! Souji-"

Both of their mouth suddenly were clamped down by a pair of hand, shutting the noise from them as Souji brought both of their face under his arms.

"Haha. It's nothing actually." He tightened his hold on the both man as they struggled to wriggle away from him. Souji quickly turned to his back with Heisuke and Saitou were struggling for air as Souji's big hand had closed their way of breathing.

"Please enjoy your night and make it a pleasurable one, both of you." He winked to the newlywed before disappearing to the other side of the hallway.

"What give?!"

"Pray you'll be able to see tomorrow's sunrise."

Then they heared numbers of footstep as if they were running after someone and another apologetic but amused voice came out. It seemed like Souji's.

She automatically giggled upon the sight they had not seen but only audible in their ears.

"So you finally loosen up?" He watched her face being amused at one time but quickly changed to another expression upon hearing his voice.

'Is she afraid of me?'

She totally forgot that he was still behind her and her hand still in his grasp.

"W-what do you mean? I'm always like this." She followed his pace with her hand still in his. But she have to step a quite big stride to caught up with his. And he even ignored her remark; as if he was mad at her.

'Is he mad at me?' The thought send chill throughout her veins as she never saw he was mad before. He always showing his delightful smile that once stole away her virgin heart.

"Sano..." He once again ignored her call.

'Damn it! Who is it?!' He thought sagely deep within him as his amber eyes grazed over the yard of the compound; searching for the figure who came across his view seconds ago.

He opened the door of their room and let her enter first before he stepped in and slide closed the door.

There she saw one white futons on the floor. She quickly turned white at the sight before her.

'I-I'm not ready for this...'

"Toshimi." His deep voice hovered behind her. She hesitantly but surely turned to him, only to find his taut face in view.

"Go to bed first. I have some business to attend to." He saw the fright in her face and his face soften as he brought her to the futon. They sat face to face with her gaze locked to hers.

"Are you afraid of me?" He caught her chin with his fingers before she managed to turn her face away. The gentle voice almost made her heart burst out in complete embarrassment. She shook her head.

"No. It's not that. I were just... afraid of myself."

He grinned to ease away the tension on her face.

"You are. But you have no reason to be. I will get frightened too if you're afraid, ya know." His voice sounded teasing. Somehow.

Confusion surged through her face.

"Why?"

His grin widened.

"I'm afraid later your face will become as taut as your brother."

She instinctively let out a surprise laugh, releasing all the tension from her visage, unconsciously attracting his eyes to the dents on her cheeks.

'She is beautiful.'

"It's good to see you smile again." He placed his hand at the back of her head and leaned closer to her, fading away her laughter.

She froze as his face came closer.

He placed a chaste kiss on her cheek, on where the dimple appeared just now at the corner of her lips.

"Go to sleep now. And get well soon." He caressed her bandaged left hand up to her shoulder before he rolled to his feet and exited the room, leaving her petrified on the futon with her eyes left unblinked before she pinched her cheek to ensure herself she didn't spaced out to another world again.

**\*\*End of chapter 4\*\***

So whaddya think? I'm sorry the chapters were way too short but I thought that was just my style (heh. Actually that is my ultimate weakness) But I hope it wasn't boring. The story will get much more interesting later, I assure you. Stay tuned for the next chapter :3

I really appreciate reviews. It's very satisfying to have both pros and cons about the story. So please feel free to leave one so it will help me in writing the next chapter :) Arigatou!

## 5. Flaring Red Eyes

He rolled his eyes in disgust as soon as he fathomed what are the people in the abandoned quarters are planning all along. Despite of the cheerful air at the yard of the quarters, with the three brats hanging out carefreely under the dark night sky, one with the chestnut colored hair, the one on his side bare the indigo hair with his average long hair left hanging on his right shoulder and the other with brown hair with a high ponytail, his gifted quickwittedness never failed him in this very deceiving situation. He might get up being absorbed into their silly trick if he missed this important observation, the response from the auburn haired man as soon as he intentionally appearing himself before his pathway which revealed to him their long-planned plan to caught him tonight.

"He's quite blunt in showing his raging emotion. I don't care why... but I thank you for that." A supercilious smile arched over his face as soon as he saw a troop of armed men with swords marching silently to his current location. He chose to ignore their nearing presence and went back to watch the three men in the yard who bumped with the lady with her hand bandaged, but they had disappeared from his long range view.

"Hi there. Looking for us?" A voice with a spice of sarcasm echoed behind him. A sharp slash of air rang as the blade made its way to his head while another glinted blade ready to cut his torso into two parts. Just before they managed to cut his body to smaller pieces, a

fast rush of air blew before them, causing the fallen dried leaves to spin in the direction of the wind and eventually resorted to the ground back again.

The both man had missed their target.

Souji and Saito froze before their gaze locked up to their target who ridiculously had escaped their sharp tip of blade just within a second on the roof of the wall of the compound.

It had never happened before. Even for some skilled swordsman they have managed to defeat them, earning themselves as the top student in Kondo Isami's dojo. Not to mention the untamed wild ronin whom each night will meet their death angel at the tip of their blade.

The figure smirked, exposing his demonic side when he burst out laughing devilishly upon their surprised reaction.

"Hahahaha! You silly lowly creature! Can you repeat that again?! You human looked so damn hilarious!" He blatantly referring to their shocked expression when he just disappeared before them and had mentally slapped them on how such confident manner could get back on themselves again. The unknown figure even fall to his knees to recover himself the air that had escaped from his lungs and his stomach hurt miserably.

Feeling much more insulted rather than irritated, Souji stepped forward, still managed to wear his usual smug on his face with his katana extended to his side.

"You seemed to be a fine enemy I see. It will miserably ruin my pleasure to let you go breathily from this place. But, must I remind you, we're no human." He raised his sword onto his shoulder, letting it extended to his back. His smirk widened. "We are just a pack of wolves hungry for a slice of meat in the midnight."

A sharp sting of pain smeared out from his bare forearm as blood was gushing out from the cut.

"Sorry I'm a bit of late." Shinpachi's voice rang behind him before he felt the prickle of blood ran down his hand. "It doesn't matter whether you are human or not, it's just indecent to peek on a lady isn't it?" Shinpachi pulled back his sword with intention to stab him again. "Especially the one who already married and live together with this wolves."

The playful expression he wore suddenly faded away as his blade was refrain by the very man using his bare hand. The man with the dark bluish hair let out a silver gun from his side with his other hand and pointed it right to Shinpachi's face.

"So long sucker." A snap sound was heard before his hand went to the trigger.

Their faces turned white upon the strange tool in his hands but they not idiot enough to not know he's going to hurt their comrade. Shinpachi was petrified as if bewitched before him, unable to move as cold sweat ran down his face.

"Bang!"



A voice imitating the sound of the shoot rang instead of the real one. The one with the light purple eyes smirked again upon the sight before him; the startling expression from the human especially the one in front of him. He had fooled them into believing he's going to shoot their friend.

"Joking." He muttered before a sharp pain surged through his torso. A blade but much more shorter than sword with a rounded shape and a sharp tip on its end penetrated his body.

"What's your intention of coming here? There's something you want from her right?" The one of Roshigumi's main captain twisted the spear in his hold to hold him to his mercy. "Say it." The man grunted in pain as he hold the metal from twisting the organs inside him upside down. Shinpachi and the other took a fighting stance and slowly surrounded the wounded man.

"Sano. Be careful. He is able to disappear from one place to another." He didn't managed to finish his word as the man disappeared again from their view.

"You mean like this?" The black clothed man suddenly caught their sight while holding his gun to the back of Sano's head. "No one can stand behind me for so long, ya know."

"Sano!"

Bang!

Her eyes flew opened with her body threw from the soft futon upon the loud sound that echoed from just outside of the compound. She was just about to drift into the dreamland before the noise shattered her upcoming destination.

"What kind of sound is that?"

She instinctively turned to the low but audible voice at the doorstep.

"Nii-san? What are you doing here?" Hijikata raised his finger on his mouth; a signal to shush her while his gaze still locked to the view of the outside of the yard. The door was opened slightly, revealing the dim light into the room from the dark black sky. Being unsatisfied with his ignorance to her question, she struggled out of the futon then another banging sound ceased her movement.

Hijikata threw opened the shoji door with his hand on the hilt of the sword on his left waist. He turned to Toshimi before stepping out, "Just stay here. Don't ever try to get out of the room. Not until someone come here." His intense gaze gave her prick of anxiety upon the unfolding event just few meters away from the room. The door closed back with a silent thud.

She don't know what to do so her eyes just locked intensely to the door, silently hoping someone will come back to the room safely. No, not just someone. She lifted her hand to pray so that everyone is alright without any major injuries but she just realized her left hand was still in the fold of the bandages that hang from her right shoulder, making it possible to pray with just one hand. She knew she

should use her left hand the least as to help the process of healing of the tissues on her left shoulder.

'But I feel just fine now.' She tried to lift her left shoulder only to find she no longer feel any pain. 'Should I open it?' She thought.

As if she forgot the strange loud noise just now, she began to loosen the sash on her waist, tugged the hem of the dress to her side, revealing both of her shoulder to her own view. The expert hand that used to treat the wounded men then started to untied the knot on the bandage with a simple pull, releasing her left hand slowly from the constrained of the white fabric. She straightened her left hand to regain the nice flow of blood throughout each of her nerves.

"It healed faster than I thought." Without realizing she voiced out her thought as surprise hit her; the gash already closed itself with the renewed cell. Her long black hair in some way disturbed her study of her own wound thus she gathered her hair into her hand and let it loose on her back.

"Toshimi!" The door of the room threw opened wildly.

Two pair of eyes stared at her with great surprise as their eyes locked with each other. Despite of the shock, she managed to cover herself by pulling the fallen kimono up until the dress allowed, just above her chest. Her face was stained deep rose on her cheeks as she crossed her hands over her exposed shoulder in futile attempt to cover herself.

The hand with the red gear closed back the door with as much effort as when he opened the door earlier, giving a startle to the emerald eyes whom gaze suddenly disturbed by the thin paper of the shoji door.

Souji quickly regained his attention to the slightly annoyed man on his side after clearing his throat few times. "That was unintentional, Sano-san. What's important she's safe now." He raised his hands to his sides as if defending himself with a sly smile on his lips. Sano narrowed his eyes in disbelief towards his nonchalant demeanour, in an attempt to calm himself after the long run from the main entrance to the room, but he just couldn't quite keep his beating heart to its usual melody after what he saw earlier.

"Is everything alright Sano-san? Okita-san? Is she in there?" Heisuke ran along with Souji, Hijikata and Shinpachi on his back. "You bet. Everything is jussst under control now." Souji's over cheerful voice somehow raised a suspicion among them.

"Does it mean we missed him?! Kuso!"

"But now we finally sure who is he aftering for."

"That's right."

"Forgive me for not being much a help-"

"Cut it off Saito! You were there when-"

The voice from the outside once entered her right ears but left again

through her another ear. She was so shocked she was unable to give a thought on what and why did they suddenly rushed in to her room. Especially the time was just not right!

"I will make it up later-"

"Make sure there enough people patrolling tonight-"

"I will-"

"Sano go get a treat from your-"

She quickly cover herself back in her night garment. 'Just how should I face them, Kami-sama?' She tighten the sash on her garment with shame washed over her face. 'Shoud I pretend I am sleeping when he come in?'

"For your wound."

'Or maybe not.' She hesitated whether to hide herself in the blanket or in the closet or just pretend nothing had happened before.

"-resume tomorrow. Get ready for tomorrow's patrol."

'Argh! Why is this happening to me?' She mentally shouted to herself.

"Dismiss-"

Her body thoughtlessly straightened upon the sound of the opening of the door, then the footstep of his before the door closed back quietly.

"I thought you're already asleep." He let a smile touched his lips as soon as her disheveled profile came into his sight; the ruffled kimono on her body seemed so evident with her coerced dazzled face hung on her visage. She seemed wanted to say something but then her violet eyes widened, she rolled to her feet and approached him slowly.

"Sano, you're bleeding." Her almost whispered voice hit his ears as her eyes locked to the strands of blood smeared down from his right temple to his cheek. He saw the concerned feature on her face before her hand naturally reached for his right jaw and gently turned it to the opposite side, then she did the same to left one; inspecting if there are other injuries on him, but she found none.

"Is there somewhere else you feel pain?" With her passion in the medical field, and the natural compassionate she possessed upon seeing an injured man, be it a child or a woman, she know it is her responsibility to treat them until they recover back again. Because that is the duty of a doctor, even though they themselves get hurt in order to save people in need. She even forgot she was gazing on her husband's torso and hands. "Or maybe a bruise somewhere? What about the others? Did they got hurt too?" She stood on tiptoe to inspect the back of his head with both of her hand but he was too tall she can't reached him.

He let out a chuckle before he crouched down and pulled her petite

body into his arms and hauled her in to his embrace, leaving both of her feet hanging from the floor. "Should I do it like this so you can reach me?"

Instantly her face feel hot as he was looking up at her. She don't have anywhere else to put her hands except on his broad shoulder. "Sano, this isn't necessary at all. Put me down." She tried to sound stern, he realized amusedly, but only resulting in tightening of his hold to her. She then tried to wriggle away from his iron hold before a mischief idea hit him.

"Aww!" He frowned with his left hand went to the back of his head. Almost instantly she stopped struggling and start eying him with the previous concern she had showed him. But then her brow raised in suspicion. "Is this for real?"

He brought her hand to the back of his head, fingers to fingers. He guided her forefinger with his to the little bulging surface while he staring intently onto her focused face with her eyes darting away from him, as if trying to read the non-exist bulge on the back of his head.

"Here?"

"No not there. Here." He brought her fingers to another area.

"It doesn't seem like a bruise to me-"

"Ouch!"

She gasped even though deep inside she didn't believe the strong, tough and skilled man such as him would actually groan in pain when she pressed the so-called bruise. She even forgot to treat the already evident wound on his temple. She let out a sigh.

"Sano, please let me treat your wound first then I can easily examine your bruises if you heartily put me down." Her almost pleaded remarks caught him off guard.

"Right." He walked to the already lied futon and brought them both to fall onto the soft surface, alarming her of his action. Afraid that his weight would crush her, he propped his elbows to her sides. His amber eyes grazed over her much reddened face than before with a slightly changed of mood.

She wanted to ask why when she saw the sudden prick of sorrow glinted in his eyes but he suddenly buried his face at the crook of her neck.

"S-Sano? Are you okay?" She suddenly got worry if he ever possessed a heavy injuries that was still invisible in her eyes.

"Your shoulder healed already?" His deep and breathy voice hit her neck and ear, alerting herself that she had not told him about her cured injury.

"Well yes as you can see me now. Sano please-" She tried to pushed him away from her to start the progress of treating him but instead her words was cut mid-air.

"Shh, Toshimi. Just answer me for now, okay?" He felt her body tense before he felt she nodded in assent.

"Who... did you fight that night?" Initially he refused to ask the question that have been longing in his head since the night he found her all covered in blood, but he can no longer keep it bottled inside him.

He need an answer.

She gulped.

"I... I don't know. I don't remember the face."

"You mean face or faces?"

She paused for awhile before resuming. "Faces... I think. No. I don't remember..."

"Besides of this wound," he gently landed his face on her left shoulder, "Did they hurt you elsewhere?" Then he felt she shook her head in denial.

He lifted his face to look on hers. "Are you sure?" They exchanged gaze before he slipped his hand under her waist to meet her back. "What about here?" His fingers found the dent of her spine and stroked it ever so slowly on a line when she suddenly gasped and flinched simultaneously from his touch but he continued anyway.

"Sano-ouch!" She grabbed his hand to stop his relentless assault but it failed miserably as his hand was much more stronger than her. Her body arched upward painfully before he pulled her up and settled her on his lap.

"Just hang on little bit more. It'll be fine soon." He whispered soothing words as he felt her breath became shallow in each stroke. He saw the usual bright violet pupils were slowly changing; flaring with red blazing stare which came out before she let out an animalistic groan.

He turned white as soon as he saw the unforeseen event unfolding before him. She clutched his arms with her nails, undoubtedly will leave marks but he chose to neglect it as the thing that matter the most is that she has lost her insanity while turning into this... something...

Something undoubtedly dangerous.

The movement on her spine ceased, together with the rough clenching of her nails on his skin. Her body fall limpy into his arms with her violet eyes half-opened, half-conscious. She felt herself being held with a pair of strong arms with her head rested on his shoulder before she heard him muttered something unaudible in her ears as her conscience was slipping away.

He realized her consciousness are fading but he kept on whispering apologetic whispers as he was the one who insisted to prove to himself that the man's remarks earlier was not more than a hollow joke, but it proven to be true, and he had coerced his newly bride to

feel the pain she didn't even know she possessed on her small figure. He clenched his fists so tight that it trembled with rage.

"Damn it what have they done to you?" His voice hissed with wrathfulness before he sank her onto the waiting futon while keeping her close to him the entire night.

**\*\*End of chapter 5\*\***

Stay tuned for the upcoming chapter :) please review :3

## 6. The Aching Memory

He playfully rolling the gun with his fingers through the triggers hole while making his way up into the fogging alley under the chilly night air. His usual smug face was absent at the time. His brows contorted in contempt while disdain and scorn glinted in his eyes. The image of the man with red auburn hair whom had stabbed him through his body leaped up into his eyes. 'That man... I'll make sure we meet again.' A dangerous smirk ran across his face.

A figure stepped out of the shadow, stopping his pace. "How is it?" A man with dark red hair, a small ponytail on the back with black clothes on his body, decorated with a pair of white snake twirled on both of his broad shoulder, revealing himself to the dim light of the night. The man with the gun snorted before he resorted the gun to his waist. He tugged open the black cloak from his torso, revealing a long, black and an uncharacteristic tattoos, almost resembling a black fire on his left forearm twirling up to his shoulder, concealed by his sleeveless black shirt as he hold the cloak with his hand and left it hanging on his back.

Smirking, "You were there earlier, aren't you?" He walked passed him and stopped, looking at him in the corner of his eyes. "Then you know what happened back then. There's no need to ask me, ya know." The cyan eyes locked to his companion's wounded torso, which had healed the time it got hit but the hole it left on his shirt might stain a piece of honour and pride he bare as an oni; being wounded by a human.

Again, his pace came to a halt as another shadow seeping quietly into the hazy pathway. A man with a golden hair, significantly seemed more reserved than the two, an elegant white kimono on his body, accompanied with black outer garment with gold trimmed on its edge approached them. His sparkling ruby eyes came into contact with his purple one.

He wiped off the grim on his face before he bowed slightly to the royal oni, Kazama Chikage.

"I have returned." His voice was flooded with politeness that he himself was uncertain whether the voice was actually his or not.

The man with the blond hair smirked upon the response from the oni he just hired few weeks ago. "Spare me the courteousness. I know you better than anyone else, Shiranui." His voice was deep and low when it reached his ear.

Kazama eyed the man before him as he lifted his head to meet eye to eye with the powerful oni. His obvious changed of behaviour didn't alarm him; because he knew where his faith and loyal belong to.

"So she's back, huh?" A mysterious smirk lied on his lips while both of his accomplices stood before him, prepared for the next order to be taken.

"That oni shinobi, tell me everything about her."

\_In another place, another dimension\_

\_"She's innocent. Let her go." A firm remarks from the ravishing woman in the purple shinobi outfit managed to stop them as she stood in front of them in adamant stance. The weak and the half-opened eyes stared faintly on her friend in front of her while her beaten body was being held by other two shinobi on her sides, each hand in their firm hold.\_

\_One of the man who wore a pair of dangerous blazing jade eyes with an elegant kimono made his way to her.\_

\_Slap!\_

\_"Who do you think you are?" His voice thundered in controlled rage.\_

\_Despite the pain on her left cheek and a trace of blood smeared from her red lips, she dared herself to stared into the fury eyes.\_

\_"I know who I am, and wise enough to judge that she's innocent. But who are you to judge her when you're not even give her the chance to speak for herself?" She was ready for another hit from the high ranking oni before her, her hands prepared to counterattack him.\_

\_She have to save her from this groundless accusation.\_

\_Being driven by the royal oni mad rage, her friend was sentenced to death.\_

\_For killing his sister; a princess of the large ancient clan of demon from the northeast, Tsunade-hime.\_

\_"I didn't intend to quarrell with you, lowly servant. If it's not because of your ancestors made an oath to stay with us, you couldn't even stand the demon blood running throughout your veins." His eyes grazed over the furious shinobi from head to toes with another disgust evident in his eyes. "You're pitiful and disgraceful to the pure-blood oni. Especially your friend right here." He spat the words and threw his gaze to the limp body in his guards hold.\_

\_The face with half-opened violet eyes swallowed bitterly the words she had heard ever since she was captured. But she could care less.\_

\_"If... things were different..." All of them turned to her as she began to whispered ever so slowly with harsh breath.\_

\_Then the violet eyes shifted to the oni with the green

eyes.\_

\_ "I... would have killed you too-" His big fists hit her face marvelously, silencing her rude remarks.\_

\_ "Hitomi!" \_

\_ Her boiling point reached its peak, watching her own friend being hit mercilessly and being judged unfairly, she curled her fists so tight then brought it upward to hit the so-called royal oni.

\_

\_ "Stop it.. Kimigiku..." A low but audible voice reached her.\_

\_ Her hand stopped.\_

\_ The man smirked. "What's the matter, shinobi? Don't have enough gut to hit me?" \_

\_ Her own purple eyes locked to his mocking eyes, fueling her wrath.\_

\_ "Let them be..." Hitomi's voice reached her again, she can feel the consolation in her voice.\_

\_ "Hitomi..." Tears began to swelling in her eyes. Supposed she was the one who have to save and console her from the death punishment that awaits her. \_

\_ Even in the end, she still managed to give her some sort of consolation, to soothe away Kimigiku's turmoil.\_

\_ And her own.\_

\_ "Because they don't know..." \_

Her eyes fluttered open. The plain white ceiling of the room greeted her.

The tears that swelled since her encounter with her long lost friend began to run down from the corner of her eyes, wetting her pillow in the process.

The dream came again.

Her friend's last words, stabbed her like dagger deep in her heart.

She pressed the sleeve of her night garment onto her wet eyes.

Even though it happened a hundred years ago, the image of her being beheaded in the crowd of the the oni society, still lingered in her memory.

"Hitomi... I failed to protect you... Forgive me."

**\*\*End of chapter 6\*\***

Sorry for the late update. By the way, the second movie is up, go watch it in youtube :) But please prepare tissues on your side, it'll



come into handy ;3

## 7. Man of The Sea

\_ "Hijikata-san, I'll take her to my place." \_

\_ Hijikata lifted his head from the paper on his desk, the brush in his hand left a bold stroke on the white paper, startled.\_

\_ "Would you care to repeat that again? I thought I misheard you." He turned his face slightly to the man sitting behind him.\_

\_ "I'm taking her with me. For the time being." Sano spoke calmly, waiting for his brother-in-law reply.\_

\_ He snorted with a slight grin on his face then put down the brush on the inkstone, then turned his body fully to face him.\_

\_ "You might mistaken me for not allowing her to go with you, aren't you?" Hijikata crossed his arms over his chest, shaking his head slightly. "She's no longer under my responsibility, but you." \_

\_ Sano smiled, "I know. That's why I'm taking her there." \_

\_ Hijikata stared in great relief to him before exhaled deeply. "Now I know she'll be with you, nothing's going to worry me again." \_

\_ Sano chuckled, "Hijikata-san you sound like an old geezer, ya know." \_

\_ He smirked in response, "Then you'll know what I'm talking about later." The images of Toshimi playing prank, climbing someone else's roof, but all of that when she was still a child.\_

\_ She is a lady now.\_

\_ Or to be precise, a married woman.\_

\_ 'She won't do such thing again, is she?' Hijikata thought while anxiety started to wash over his face.\_

\_ "We'll head back in an hour. So if you excuse me." Sano started to get to his feet.\_

\_ "Harada, I must remind you one thing." His voice turned serious suddenly, stopping his movement.\_

\_ Sano raised his eyebrow, questioning. "What is it, Hijikata-san?" \_

\_ "Toshimi... she... haven't been in a ship before." \_

\_ Huh? \_

\_ "You're going back to Ishigaki, right?" \_

\_ Sano nodded, while still didn't understand what was he trying to say.\_

\_"Just make sure she come back here occasionally, okay?"\_

Thud!

His immersing stare into the red horizon disrupted by the dull impact sound. He quickly headed to the cabin, where Toshimi was resting.

Resting from her exaggerated sea-dizziness.

"Toshimi?" He called her name but only were answered by a groan, and she wasn't on the high bed. He frowned before he went to other side of the bed, searching for the source of the sound.

She was lying on her stomach, her face facing the wooden floor.

The ship swayed to the right.

She groaned again.

"Are you okay, Toshimi?" His face afflicted with worry; she wasn't recovering since the first minute the ship set sailed to the ocean.

He stroked her back gently, trying to ease away her dizziness.

"I.. uhh.. I'm fine.. Please ignore me.." Her voice was muffled with her hands, while trying to suppress herself from throwing up again.

The ship swayed to the left.

"Ughhh..."

Sano quickly reached for the pail at the other side of the bed and brought it to her.

She threw up.

He brought a glass of water to clean away her mouth.

After a while, she managed to sit with her back on the bedpost, her head lulled back and forth.

'Is she going to be okay? I bet she never want to get on a ship again.'

She lifted her half-lidded eyes to his amused eyes.

'I swear this is the last time.. I'll get on a ship...' She thought remorsefully.

'Now I understand what Hijikata-san was trying to tell me.' He thought inwardly, unaware he arched a grin on his face.

"How much longer... would it take.. to reach your place?" Her chest constricted from absence of air. She has lost the track of the time; she don't know what time is it now, whether it was night or day, and what had happen in the sea.

No. She don't want to know anything about it.

She just want to reach the land so badly.

Sano rested his hand on her head, ruffling her black hair in attempt to comfort her.

"Around three more hours we'll arrive at the shore." He replied with pity embedded on his face.

Her feeble eyes widened in surprised, as long as her eyelid allowed. She showed the sign of three by her fingers, with disbelief eyes, instantly covering her mouth when another wave of dizziness aroused.

"Sano... send my regards.. to your family..." She whispered weakly, instinctively pulling his ears closer to her in attempt to hear her low voice.

"What? I can't hear you." He placed his ears near her covered mouth.

"I... may not be able to... meet them..." She spoke slowly.

Huh?

"This dizziness... is killing me.."

He burst out laughing heartily. His shoulders shook hardly.

"It's nice meeting you.." She whispered monotonously, while Sano mercilessly immersed in his tears-swelled laugh.

"No one in history have ever encountered death while experiencing sea-drunk." He rested his hand on her shoulder while recovering his breath. "You really know how to joke, aren't you."

"Then.. I'd like to be the first-"

She threw up again.

"Oh no! Your clothes!"

\* \* \*

><p>She felt a small finger poking her cheeks relentlessly.<p>

"Toshi-nee, yer sure sleep a ton!" A jovial voice of a child with a strange accent reached her ears.

"Stop it, Naru, yer botherin' 'er. Mother, yer sure she's okay?"

Then a concerned but distant voice of a young man echoed.

With a Yaeyama dialect.

"'Course she's. Just wait for another minute she'll open 'er eyes."

This time a motherly voice erupted from her side. With the same dialect.

"Ain't never saw a person this severe 'cause of the sea. Or maybe sea-drunk ain't just the case? Yer sure she ain't carrying Sano-nii's child? Or something like that?"

The same male voice rumbled again.

"I ain't think so but--"

Then she felt a hand pressing gently on her belly.

Instinctively she jumped as a response from the tickling receptor from her stomach. Her eyes shot opened.

"She opened 'er eyes!"

She saw herself lying on a futon in a room with strangers on her sides. The three pair of eyes were all but watching her with anticipation.

"Thank goodness. Ya alright?" The middle-aged woman with black hair on her side gently grasping her hand.

She could hardly fathomed what was happening around her. She lifted her body from the futon.

"Where am I?" She hold her head to support herself as the faint dizziness still lingered in her head.

"Yer in grampa's house!" The enthusiastic child on her left, with a small ponytail on the side of her left head, replied her with a genuine smile on her face.

The man around her age whom stood at the shoji door smirked. "She ain't goin' to understand it if ya put it that way, Naru."

She looked at the man with the red hair for a brief moment before she realized there was something in him that seems familiar to her.

"That's right! Ya in grandma's house!" The little girl named Naru cried fervently.

She puzzled.

The young man sighed.

The woman chuckled.

Naru's answer doesn't help at all.

"Yer don't hafta worry, Toshimi-san, yer fine now with us." The woman's remarks managed to soothe away the anxiousness in her.

"That's right." The young man took the seat near her and grinned widely. "Pardon for our discourteousness. Naru." He put his hand on the girl's head and directed her to bow.

"N-no! Not at all!"

"I'm Seishuu, Sano-nii's younger brother. Ya may call me Sei." The smile that almost a duplicate to Sano still glued on his face.

She gasped.

"Nice ta meet'cha, Toshi-nee! My name is Naru. Six years old!" The girl lifted her head, swaying her ponytail slightly.

"She's Sasuke-nii's daughter, or tu put it simply, yer her auntie." Sei then pulled her ponytail.

"Hey!"

"She ain't yer sister so address 'er properly." He pulled her cheeks with both of his hands.

"Dun wanna." Naru shook her head while trying to release herself from her uncle's lap. "She's too young to be called ba-chan, so I'm callin' er Toshi-nee instead of Toshi ba-chan!" She threw herself forward, freeing herself from him. The cute little girl with glistening raven eyes ruffled her light blue kimono with her small fingers, as if wondering whether to say her next word or not. "Can I, Toshi-nee?" The eyes were shining as if it was pleading.

Influenced by her overloaded cuteness, with the ponytail on the left side of her head, added with her pleading eyes, sum of it altogether they had pulverized the glacial expression on her face.

"Sure, Naru!" She put her hand on her head in assent. Although still clouded by her exact whereabouts and when did she arrived at the place, the warm welcoming from Sano's family slightly easen her uneasiness.

She even forgot to ask where's exactly he was.

"How're ya feelin', my daughter? I'm sorry yer mightly long journey made ya fall sick." The woman on her side spoke with an amiable voice.

'D-daughter?'

She gulped at the mention of the word.

'So this must be...'

She quickly sit herself properly before bowing slightly to Sano's mother.

"Forgive me for troubling you. I hope I haven't done anything inconvenient-"

In instant she was brought into her warm embrace, stopping her words.

"There's nothin' to forgive for. Thank you for comin' here, Toshimi." Her embrace tightened. "Thank you for being his wife. Ya have brought him back 'ere." Her voice suddenly became low and subtle at the end.

She blinked her eyes in bafflement.

'You have brought him back here...? What's that supposed to mean?' She thought silently.

Her mother-in-law let her go and stared at her face intently with a relief smile.

"He really do know how to pick a wife, is he?" The old but gentle eyes danced about her face. "So Toshimi," She suddenly grabbed Toshimi's right hand with both of her hands, her face was flooded with hope. "Are you pregnant?"

Huh?

"Toshi-nee pregnant?"

She jumped from her firm hold before Naru eagerly approached them with a curious face.

"Wh-What? No!"

'Where did they get that idea?!' Suddenly she was thrown into panic.

Naru put her ears on Toshimi's belly.

"I ain't hear nothin'."

"'Course yer are." Sei pulled Naru to him. "Ya think th'baby's goin' to talk to yer or somethin'?"

"Lemme go, Sei ji-chan! I heard one from Tohru-nee the other day!" She meant the eight months pregnant woman in the neighborhood.

"That's because 'er stomach was rumblin'." His face twitched in laughter. "And yer said it was a voice of the baby?" He burst out into laughter.

Toshimi arched a smile of realization, realizing that Sano's siblings have the same habit; laughing zealously on others' ridiculousness, no matter what kind of situation they're in. Like she had earlier in the ship.

"So I take it as no then?" The light of hope in the old face slightly distinguished, sparking a feeling of guilty in her.

"I'm afraid I'm not... err.. mother." She was hesitant initially to address the woman before her as 'mother' but looking at the tender smiling face made her made up her mind. And speaking of pregnant, really made the heat in her face escalated.

In the other hand, Seishuu and Naru still arguing with each other in her other side.

"It's alright. Both of ya still have plenty of time. There's no need t'rush."

She smiled unconvincingly to her mother-in-law in response to her statement. She can't say she wasn't ready to get pregnant now, not to mention she and Sano just got married three days ago. It's just impossible for her to...

Right?

Furthermore, she tried to erase the memory of her sleeping in his arms in their first night together. Not to add to his silly joke when she asked what happened the night before.

\_"Good morning."\_

\_The first thing she saw right in the morning was his bare chest.\_

\_Then a chaste kiss placed upon her forehead.\_

\_As an impulse reaction, it was certainly for a girl who haven't sleep with any man except with her brother to push her husband away from her.\_

\_She backed away from him few meters away, with that sleepy but shocked face, erupting a diabolic grin from him.\_

\_"There's no need to distance yourself from me, ya know." Seeing her response really made his day, and making him wanting to tease her again.\_

\_"Wh-what happened?" She asked with baffling face, still unable to digest what kind of situation she currently in.\_

\_His smirk widened and he propped his head with his elbow on the futon.\_

\_"You don't want to know what I did to you last night-" A pillow hit his face marvelously, muted his words.\_

"Ah. I forgot I've to invite the villagers for tonight's fiest." The woman rolled to her feet and started to step out of the room. Just before she exited, she took a glance back to her only daughter-in-law.

"Be ready, Toshimi-san. You'll hafta offer a dance tonight." She left them with a secretive smile arched on her lips.

"Tonight's fiest? A dance?" She asked the remaining two person in the room with her nervous embedded in her face. "And what should I get ready for? I don't even know how to dance."

"Don't worry, Toshi-nee. I'll help ya." Naru's cheerful voice slightly enlightened the nervous in her as she approached her and rested her small hand on her shoulder.

"Ah. Tonight the villagers will come 'ere to celebrate you an' Sano-nii." Seishuu answered her question positively as he crossed his

arms over his chest.

"To celebrate us?" She asked again for reassurance.

Seishuu and Naru nodded simultaneously.

"It is a custom of the village to celebrate the couple who just got married. The villagers will gather 'ere for the food fiest tonight." He could read the building anxiousness in her eyes and he couldn't help but to grin amusedly.

"A food fiest?" She asked again.

"Ayup!" Naru nodded ardently. "But ya don't hafta worry, Toshi-nee. The folks will cook and then bring the food that Sano ji-chan give them for t'night. Yer will just have to stay with Sano ji-chan."

'Sano ji-chan?'

"That's right." She just realized that Sano was currently absent at the moment. "Naru, where's Sano ji-chan? I haven't see him since I woke up." Her eyes began to wander at the yard in front of her. Amazement began to surge through her. The yard was way too vast and beautiful, even though only judging from her current room. She could see the wall of stones stood proudly as the gate of the house. No. This place couldn't be a house. It must be a super large house with several ponds at the compound, complemented with numbers of branches family which stayed in the same place.

Then she started to wonder; who's exactly Sano is?

"Sano ji-chan currently is bein' punished by grampa-" Seishuu suddenly covered Naru's mouth with his hand.

"Huh? Punish?" Her violet eyes widened.

"Hahaha. Please ignore her." He lifted her small body from the floor with a implausible laugh before he walk out of the room, leaving her with abundant of questions and suspicions in her head.

\* \* \*

><p>The crowd fall muted as she began her exotic dance, flipping her hands gracefully in the air, the soft red kimono on her body swayed slightly as she made an elegant spin from the back to the front, causing one of the white flower on her hair to fall down on the tatami mat.<p>

His eyes immobilized on the breathtaking sight in front of him, enchanted by his own ravishing wife, totally unaware she's wearing the very kimono he bought for her since they arrived in Gotou.

She pressed her hands together before she crouched down on her knees and she made a bow as for the end of the dance. The audiences clapped their hands fervently as the show ended.

"So beautiful."

"Ain't never saw any dance beautiful than that."



"Ya bet!"

"What's her name again?"

"Toshimi, I think."

"Ahh.. Unlucky fer us she's married."

She lifted her head as she saw a hand extended towards her.

Sano.

A wide smile quirked on his face.

His eyes met hers in brief instant before she put her hand on his, then he pulled her up and made their way to his seat. He felt her hold in his hand tightened as he saw she was standing behind him, as if making him as a shield to hide herself.

Her face was bright red.

"Are you alright, Toshimi?" His voice flooded with worry as he turned his body fully to her.

"Aww.."

"The two look so good t'gether"

"That's good for him."

"Then he has more reason to stay 'ere, ain't it?"

She tugged his dark blue kimono while trying her best not to be affected by the crowd's stare. "I'm going to go change for a bit." She whispered lowly, loud enough for him to hear before she bowed slightly to the amazed audiences and presenting a kind smile before she left the main hall.

"Oi Sano-nii. Knock it off already."

Seishuu pulled his brother to his previous seat, disturbing his view of line from following Toshimi's shadow. He shook his head to rebalance himself before pouring another shot of sake into his cup and gulped it down in one shot. His younger brother, Seishuu mere watching him with anxious face on his side. Sano's hand was prevented from adding the sake again as Sei grabbed the bottle and voluntarily poured the drink into Sano's cup. He then drank it again all at once.

"At least pretend yer fine in front the villagers. They were all but watchin' ya, Sano-nii."

"What do you mean? Am I look disturbed?" He gulped his drink again. He couldn't lie to his brother that what had his Father had told him in the morning bothered him so much.

"So it's about what Father told'ya this mornin', ain't it?" Sei's guessing hit the bullseye.

Sano chuckled bitterly, uninterested in the conversation. "Yer so smart as ever. Yer goin' to be a better leader than I am."

Seishuu grinned. "There ya go." He punched his brother's shoulder lightly. "I've long wish to hear ya speakin' like that. It has been two years since ya left, huh?"

He threw his gaze over the dish he had caught for today; everything on the plate came from the sea, prawns, numbers of octopus, and of course mainly fishes.

He just couldn't deny what is flowing in his veins.

The blood of the seaman.

"Does Toshi-nee know 'bout this?" Seishuu asked again. Sano shook his head.

"No. Not yet."

"Hahaha. Don't worry, Sano-nii. I can see Toshi-nee is a very independent and strong-willed woman. Yer so lucky to have someone like her." Sano raised his eyebrow as he picked a roasted fish into his plate. "What made ya say that?" He suddenly became interested in hearing his thought. He haven't met her the entire day, and he just meet her when she appeared to offer a dance in front of the crowd. For a moment he thought the burden in his head was lifted as soon as he saw her. But now she disappear again, it seems the stress in him doubled.

"I saw her helpin' the farmers harvesting in the farm and then I saw her picking few herbs in the hills with Naru in th'afternoon. But I don't know what for." Sei replied with cucumber miso in his mouth. "Oh. Before I forgot," He swallowed the food in his mouth before resuming. "Where did she learnt that dance? I heard Yasuba ba-chan said somethin' that that was her first time watchin' it after seventy years. She said that was a dance her gramma had taught her in 'er childhood."

"Huh? The dance?"

Seishuu nodded. "Yup. It's pretty awesome she easily tackled the folks' heart with her antique dance, huh. They seemed to like 'er so much." He pointed the chopstick in his hand to the group of gossiping aunties in the back of the hall.

He frowned. He didn't even know Toshimi can dance because she's not the usual type of girl who practice the feminine things, not to mention she was raised only under the strict monitoring of her brother.

She's definitely out of the league.

Even so... That was the one thing that attracted him to her.

"Speaking of her, what took her so long?"

Seishuu sensed the frustration in his brother's voice as he watched his brother rolled to his feet and disappeared beyond the shoji door.

He chuckled at the sight.

"My...my... It seems the man of the sea begins to found back his lost bait, huh..."

**\*\*End of chapter 7\*\***

Dragonmaster789: Thank you for your kind review! Ya know what, I always make sure I write the story in my best condition so please keep looking forward for the next chapter! ;)

## 8. The Oath On the Bed of Red Sakura

"Toshimi, are you in there?" He put his hands at the door of his room, ready to open it anytime. He swear he heard the sound of the door on the other side of the room slammed hardly to each other. Gaining no response, "I'm coming in."

Sano entered the room after closing the door behind him. He approached her as he watched her stood in the middle of the room with her face froze in bafflement.

For a moment she remained silent as she wiped away the sweat ran down her face, her body was getting hotter than before she entered the room after the dance.

She don't know what had cause her to feel all bloating up inside like this.

"Hey are you alright?" He cupped her reddened cheeks with his hands anxiously as he lifted her gaze to him. He grazed every feature on her face, her beautiful lavender eyes, then slide down to her pert nose and lastly to her slightly opened lips.

Kissable lips.

He watched her plump lips slowly arched into a realization smile as she daringly caressed his face, brushing away the strands of his red hair which slightly covered his forehead.

He frowned slightly on her sudden change of behavior; added with the evident crimson stained on her cheeks and nose, "Are you drunk?"

Disregard of his remarks, she brought the strands of his hair to the back of his ear, ignoring his intense gaze that glued to her soft lips. He thought he was going to explode when she pressed her body closer to his lean body.

And so he thought he'll just follow her unforeseeable flow for now, waiting to see where this may lead them. He grinned.

"You're so..." She whispered ever so slowly as she began to caress his firm jaw. He felt her cheeks getting flushed even hotter in his hold.

"Handsome? Dashing?... Seductive?" His eyebrows arched teasingly at the end of his word. He rested one of his hand on her back and pressed her closer.

"So tall." She replied tersely. She locked her eyes to his before she winked adorably.

"Tch, what a rock-headed person are you."

"Tch, let's see whose head is more harder." She imitated his 'tch' with the same tone as his. Sano raised his eyebrow quizzically.

Then she curled her hands at the back of his head and began to play with his ponytail. She pulled the white strand fabric that keep his red hair together but his hands quickly thwarted her intention; As if being mentally slapped, he grabbed her hand from pulling it away.

"It's not that I don't like this but the guests are waiting-" He looked down upon her with his tender eyes. "We'll resume this later."

"To hell with them."

She ripped off the white fabric in one swift movement before his red hair spilled freely to his sides.

She smiled in triumph. "I win."

He chuckled in response before he brought her mouth closer to his curious nose. He sniffed once, then he sniffed again.

"Is this..." He threw his gaze throughout the room before he met two cups of tea on the table in the middle of the room with strange coloured liquid in it.

"I saw her helpin' the farmers harvesting in the farm and then I saw her picking few herbs in the hills with Naru in th'afternoon. But I don't know what for." \_

He suddenly remembered what Seishuu had told him.

He grinned pensively, "That must be it."

The intensifying of her stare escalated into predatory gaze; she bit her lower lip, her eyes locked again with his before she slipped her right hand inside of his kimono sash, while her other hand hugged his shoulder.

She put her left leg at the back of his right leg.

He quickly catch up her intention but he'll not let her do all she wanted for now.

Because he wanted to participate too in this infrequent chance.

The chance to devour her in her oblivious state.

All at once, she tackled his massive body almost impossibly as she repeat it few times but he didn't budge even one slight inch. She sighed in defeat.

"Could you at least pretend you fell down?"

He suppressed his laugh as he pinched her red cheek. "As you wish, sweetheart."

She tackled him again.

Thud!

He fall down on the floor with a loud impact, followed by his wife on the top of his body, but his head had crushed a hard object as he fall down, freezing the moment before his consciousness betrayed him.

\* \* \*

><p><em>His vermilion eyes grazed over her intoxicating features, starting from her well braided midnight black hair which laid loosely on her back, her violet eyes glinting almost gaily, then towards the soft titian red kimono on her body, all the way down until he met the alluring slim right thigh and her calf which utterly exposed to his longing eyes.<em>

\_He was watching her from afar with an obscure looks on his face.\_

\_She pressed the makeup brush made up from the wrapped white fabric onto the small fragile bowl containing faint rose powder and applied it on the back of her hand to test the colour, being satisfied, she applied it lightly on her already reddened cheeks. She rubbed her cheeks slightly with the back of her hands to erase excessive red powder while smiling delightfully to the mirror. Her exposed bent right leg went back to its position, unconsciously concealing her slightly pale skin from the scorching ruby eyes.\_

\_"Foolish woman." He muttered under his breath; harsh breath came out from his nose as the cold breeze from the sea slapped his cheek and his golden hair.\_

\_He was too proud to admit that he missed her her presence on his side.\_

\_He never made himself and his heart vulnerable to others, especially when it comes to sentimental prospect. Being the descendant of the Kazama clan, it was his responsibility to keep his clan lasts with the breed of powerful heirs and heiresses. And as the time goes on, the oni had decreased in numbers and he have yet to found the pure-blood female oni to mate with.\_

\_Pure-blood female oni.\_

\_Not a half-blooded oni who had once served the royal of his kind long ago.\_

\_He just couldn't risk the excellency of the bloodline of his future descendants.\_

\_But if, and only if, if he wish to snatch her right away from the hands of the humans looming around her every day and make her his.\_

\_ "You even forgot who you really are, huh." He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned himself on the huge tree on his right side.\_

\_She applied the moist pinkish liquid on her middle finger to her luscious lips, from the right side of her upper lips then moved gracefully to the other end and resuming to her lower lip before she pursed her lips together and smiled again to her own images on the mirror, exposing the delectable dents on her cheeks.\_

\_He snorted divertingly upon seeing her coquettish manner.\_

\_ "Just like the old time," he pointed his hand to the opened door, "You even forgot to close the door of your room."\_

\_Slam!\_

\_The door on her side threw closed wildly.\_

\_ "Toshimi, are you in there?"\_

\* \* \*

><p>She stepped out of the room and closed it slowly before she let out a sigh.<p>

Her shoulders dropped.

"I don't know it's hard to be a father." She began to walk away from her father's-in-law's room with a sloppy face.

She shortly remembered what he had just told her before.

><em><br>"Sanosuke had left home after his brother's death two years ago an' never come back again."\_

\_ "His brother?" She queried curiously.\_

\_ "Yes. I suppose you've met Naru before." His father's stern voice and firm posture made her shivered a bit. She chose not to interjected him for the second time.\_

\_She nodded tentatively.\_

\_ "Naru is his only daughter. She is the only treasure Sasuke had left behind." He paused to have a sip of his tea. She stared at him attentively; he might seemed reserved at one time but she can sense the tenderness in his amber eyes.\_

\_ "His wife passed away when she gave birth to Naru."\_

'So Naru is an orphan, huh...' She never thought the little enthusiastic girl which wear the bright smile everytime she saw her was actually a child who lived with his father only in her early four years and never experience the love and tenderness of a mother.

She might have yet to understand what did Sano's father wanted to tell her but she know it well enough he was trying his best for the future of his children.

'But why did Sano left his own home?'

'No. If he don't like it here, then why he brought me here?'

She sighed again then began to walked back to her room.

"Toshi-nee, what are yer doin' 'ere?" Seishuu suddenly popped out from nowhere.

"Ah Sei-kun." She beckoned to him eagerly. "Do you have a moment?"

Seishuu nodded tentatively as he saw the anxiety building up in her face. "But before that, I ain't see Sano-nii for a while. Do ya know where he is? His friends are here t'meet him." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder where she found a group of men waiting for him at the hallway.

She feigned a smile to the men as few of them greeted her with a genuine smile and some of them gave her a coquettish one.

Choosing to ignore them, she speaks quietly to him. "Sano said he's exhausted so he's already asleep in the room. Could you entertain them for him?" She said while scratching oddly her temple.

Seishuu raised his eyebrow in suspicion. "I don't know Sano-nii sleeps so early." He placed his thumb and forefinger on his chin, wondering. "It's okay then. His friends are my friends too. Just leave it t'me." He smiled reassuringly before turned away and left her before she able to ask him that one question.

She resumed her walk to her room and stopped her track just in front of the door. Her fingers fiddled themselves as she exhaled fretfully.

Her hands moved to the handle of the room when she saw one big hand on the other side of the door reached her hand's destination first.

The door slide opened.

He gasped in surprise.

She froze at the spot.

"I've been waiting for you."

"Did I hurt you too hard?"

Almost at the same they blurted out the question.

Then they laughed.

An awkward one.

"Should we go somewhere else?" He suggested, noting the oddness in the air.

She nodded. "Sure."

They had a walk for 10 minutes as they exited the large compound before they arrive at the lake few meters away from the place.

The fallen sakura's petal flooded the green grass as the old tree stood proudly at the side of the lake. Breathtaking enough, the sakura flower from the tree and on the ground was red in colour.

He settled down on the covered grass before patting his right side as to call for her to sit besides him. But she didn't come right away. She picked the fallen sakura on the ground and gazed on it amazedly.

"Wah. I've never see such a wonderful sakura flower." She picked another one from the ground. "It's red." She muttered under her breath.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" He laid comfortably on the grass with his arms crossed over his head. "This is my favourite spot in the village." Heedlessly, he arched a blissful smile as he closed his eyes as to enjoy such tranquility he haven't had since two years ago.

She stared at him silently, wondering what had burdened him all this while.

"What are you doing standing there? Come here." Then a wicked smile hovered over him. "Don't tell me you don't wanted to. You pounced on me earlier, don't you?"

Ignoring his provokes, "You're right. I wish I have the right drug to silent you up till the morning."

"Hahaha! Do you even know the herbs-" He burst out laughing heartily as she interjected him.

"An aphrodisiac. I know it." She made her way to his side and sat on the grass.

"You knew? Then... you drank it on purpose?" He teased her again as he propped his elbow on the grass to face her.

"Tch. Who wanted to do that?" She gave him a cold glare before she heard him let out another boisterous laugh. "I would like to have some later too-"

She placed the red sakura in her hand in his auburn hair in attempt to silent his ridiculous remarks. "There... Sanoko is born." She smiled slyly as she backed away to swallow the rare sight before her.

Sano sat up before he place his muscular arms on his chest in girlish manner. "Could you at least pretend you fell down?" He thinned his voice as he mimicked her words when she was oblivious by the drug.

She couldn't help but to laugh amusedly on his ridiculously girly side, with the flower stucked on his hair, he seemed too much for her stomach to handle.

Her stomach hurt as her laugh didn't ceased just yet.



He watched her wiped off the tears swelling up in her eyes as she began to recover her breath.

For seconds, he feel contented.

He has everything he wanted to; a wife to cherish and to protect and a big family to stay with, far away from the enemies waiting at his doorstep everyday.

For seconds, he don't feel bothered what his father had entrusted him with.

He could stay at his own village without feeling a little bit of guilty of his brother's death, as long as he have the desire and will to protect his village.

He'll do anything to protect it although it comes with a high price.

And that's why he ended up leaving the village; he wanted to possess the skills and power to protect his beloved ones.

So that what had happened to his brother won't happen to anyone in the village ever again.

"Sano." She interrupted his surmise, seeking for his attention. He can't wash off the bliss on his face as he look to her puzzled face.

"I saw you at the port earlier, after you have caught fishes from the sea. But," she paused to see her response; the smile on his face slightly distracted her, then she shook her head mentally to keep her head straight. "You seemed quite upset about something at the moment." She thought she've never saw his face that gloomy. He always wear this smile that as if he don't carry even the slightest of burden on his back. "You don't want to say to me about it?"

He sniggered. "Nothing that I can't handle of." He brushed away the sakura flower that stucked on her midnight hair. "I admit, it kinda hard to accept it at first, but I'm alright now."

"Accept what?"

"Curious, aren't you?" He gathered her hair at the back of her head in his hand and held it high on her head. His head tilted as if he was imagining something. And he got it.

"There... Toshizo has appeared."

She chuckled in response; can't quite believe he possessed such a childish manner. Then she repeated herself, "Accept what, Sanoko?"

He pulled her to his chest as he laid back down on the grass, her head on his left forearm. Then he laid on his left side, facing her. His free hand caressed her soft hair.

Her heart suddenly raced.

He keep his composure in-line.

"Follow me to the port tomorrow." He spoke lowly. "We've got something special for you."

She frowned a bit. "We?" She paused, "You mean, it's another celebration?"

She felt him nodded, not daring enough to look on his face in this small gap.

"A celebration in the way of a seaman. It become more special when you're the ex-Village Chief's only daughter."

Her eyes grew wide in surprise.

"Ahh. I got it." No wonder he seemed so charismatic and magnificent even in his late age; he was a leader of this breathtaking and harmonious village.

"You don't want to know who is the current Village Chief?" He asked in a teasing tone.

"Who is it?" She asked in anticipation.

"It's me."

"Really?" She lifted her gaze to his for reassurance before she saw his eyes speak 'yes'.

"I thought I don't want to accept it at first. But I know I don't have the reason to run away again." His voice was deep when it reached her ears. "I have you by my side."

She snorted as she averted her gaze from his to hide her embarrassment.

He lifted her chin with his fingers as his amber eyes caught her violet one, "I have made an oath to your brother to protect you," He assessed every feature on her face as if to remember each line and to savour her at the moment as he repeated his oath to her. "And if I fail, I'll split my gut open."

She was shocked at the extent her breath thwarted for a moment, then she tried to lighten the sudden tense atmosphere.

"You don't have to go that far, Sano. Besides," Suddenly she feel afraid at the thought of losing him but she managed to arch a smile, "It's not that I'm going to disappear suddenly like the wind. And I don't see any bad man here." She patted his chest for encouragement. "Please don't worry about me."

He grinned, "You can't tell me to do that. It's my job to worry on you."

\* \* \*

><p>She made her way to the port with Naru on her side.<p>

"Toshi-nee, let's go fishin' after this!" She smiled brightly as one

of her small hand carrying a twig.

She nodded eagerly. "Sure! But what are you going to do with that?" She pointed her finger to the twig in her right hand.

"This?" She lifted it higher in the air. "This is my magic stick. Naru goin' to cast a magic on ya!" She pointed the twig to Toshimi and mumbled inaudible spell.

She watched her amusedly before she bumped into someone.

"I'm sorry." She bowed once and began to walk again but the bald old man with a dark maroon kimono stopped her pace.

"Excuse me, miss." The old man smiled kindly to her. "Do you know how to get to the port?" He had just got lost in the middle of the village.

She saw a big rucksack on his back with a paper in his hand. 'So he must be a traveler. He didn't speak the local accent.' She thought.

She pointed the location of the port. "But don't worry. We are on our way to the port too. Just walk with us then." She replied before she smiled reassuringly to the old man.

The old man stared intently into her face before he let out a paper from his pocket and gave it to her. "Thank you for showing me the way. As a token of my gratitude, please accept this." She took the paper nonchalantly before bow again.

"You're welcome."

"But I'd rather walk alone than walking with a kind young lady such as you."

She smiled again. "If you insist."

She watched the old man walking up ahead. She turned to her side to look on Naru.

But she wasn't on her side.

"For this one last time, let's see who ends up with a sword on his neck."

"Huh?"

She was hearing voices again.

She scattered her gaze throughout the place but she found no one except the old man few meters away from her.

"This time too," She saw the old man turned to her slightly with a wry smile on his face.

"Be my rival, Hitomi."

**\*\*End of chapter 8\*\***

Dragonmaster789 : Thank you for wonderful review! I'll work even harder for what will come next :)

minchen0897 : I'm glad you like it. If what you mean by the culture, it is indeed a culture from the East. But since I am not an English so I'm not really sure about that :)

Thanks guys for your support! I don't know if I manage to resume this story without your kind reviews. Please enjoy and tell me what you think :)

See you in the next chapter!

## 9. Samurai vs Shinobi

\_Okay guys! Sorry for the late update! I think I have getting lazy now, heehee.\_

So it's time for the real plot! I'd say this once again, this chapter is only the beginning. There are more to happen to them in the future.

\_Here goes!\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Amidst the desolation of snow and frost,<br>The plum is the first to bloom in brilliant color.  
>The blossoms keep their fragrance,<br>even after they have scattered.\_

(Serizawa Kamo's death poem)

He threw his savage gaze throughout the Kyoto streets; the line of shops at both of his side were fairly built, quite a contrast then the last time he was here. A nasty, sardonic smirk lied across his face, intensifying the fearful gauge of the people who noticed his bloodcurdling presence, attracting their attention thus stopping them from their own activities.

"Something wrong, Serizawa-sensei?" Niimi, his accomplice looked at the powerful but vicious man on his side. Even the one who stood and walked together with the person on his side could feel the silent burning of terror in their eyes as soon as they laid their eyes on the renowned Serizawa Kamo.

Then he saw the bandage on his mercurial finger.

\_"You came for the devil man named Kimura Keiji?" The officer wearing the same dark bluish kimono as the one he saw in the front gate greeted him with an emotionless face, a habitual expression they wear everyday. He pointed his finger to the jail located at the end of the row.\_

\_He nodded. "Kimura Keiji is dead. It's Serizawa Kamo now." He replied matter-of-factly.\_

\_"Great." The officer said back, his voice heavied with sarcasm before he pulled a yellowish paper from under the table and shoved it

to him. "Take this."\_

\_Niimi took the paper into his hand and read the words written there. There was a four vertical lines of words written beautifully on the paper, a complete contrast than the condition of the paper and the blood red ink.\_

\_He frowned. 'What is this ink?' He brought the paper to his nose and smelled it.\_

\_The metallic scent of blood.\_

\_"I don't care if this is dying message or whatever it supposed to be. Just take this and tell him to not keep beheading people whenever he likes it, got it?" The demanded voice of the shogunate official echoed sharply in the lightless jail.\_

'I don't know Sensei have a talent in writing poems.' He thought again as he eyed him in the corner of his eyes.

"This place has gotten more lively than before," he opened his iron fan as his firm build stood proudly before he began to enter one of the premise. "So this is where I seep in." He closed his iron fan singlehandedly as he stepped into the shop.

"Wait up, Serizawa-Sensei!" Niimi quickly blocking his way into the shop as he daringly stood in front of him. Serizawa's eyes narrowed in controlled rage. "I don't plan this early to have another head. Do you want to be the first one?" Right after he was released from the jail of being accused of beheading his three men without the superiors' permission, he wasn't planning of throwing himself into the jail for the second time.

Niimi gulped nervously as his eyes locked with his fury one. "I didn't mean to deny you but the man from the Roshigumi," he regain his composure by clearing his throat before pointing his finger to the end of the street, "Whom bare the name Kondo Isami are waiting to meet you."

Serizawa chuckled roughly, "So they were here." He continued his pace into the shop after pushing him roughly to the side. "Tell him I'm waiting for him right here." He settled himself on the wooden bench before pouring himself a drink from the bottle. Instead of coming to people, he'd rather people come to him and begging for his help.

"Understood." Niimi nodded in assent before walked away to the small shop at the end of the street.

\* \* \*

><p><em>My special elixir has started to spread in Kyoto. Better act fast before it seep into the group of peasant samurai.<em>

She crumpled the small paper for the hundredth time with her right hand. A deep frown formed on her face as she exhaled a heavy breath.

Since few days ago, she chose to ignore the old man's abstruse declaration in the first place. The old man might have mistaken her

for someone else, as she recalled he addressed her as Hitomi. Added with the inexplicable yet impenetrable gaze he gave her, as if she is someone he had known for a long time.

She wanted to deny it.

That she felt this peculiar yet gruesome feeling upon recalling his face and deep voice.

It gave her the feeling as if she was looking at a rival. No. More to an enemy.

Or to be precise, a concealed enemy.

She placed her hand on her temple and rubbed it slowly, as if to ease away the tautness in her veins.

'Did I ever meet him before?'

But the more she tried to avoid it the higher the anxiety building inside of her.

Like something bad going to happen sooner or later.

She reopened the crumpled paper and her eyes scrutinized each letter, each stroke, and each character in case she missed something very important.

"Special elixir huh?" She tilted her head to her side, thinking. The way he said it implied that it is indeed special, but in a dangerous way.

Her violet eyes narrowed to the 'group of peasant samurai'.

"Peasant... samurai?" After a moment, she quickly shook her head sharply as to chase away the unwanted notion in her head.

'There are many more group of peasant samurai in Kyoto right? Besides, they never plan to go to Kyoto... But if only they had not told me about it.' She took a peek into the room before picking a flat-surfaced stone just beside the row of big silver stones decorated on the edge of the lake, and pretended to throw it into the room with a vexed face.

"I saw that."

"Tch."

Sano chuckled quietly as he resume packing his belongings into his small bag. But the hand-made bag going to swelled into a size of a baby hippo if he inserted the bag of pickles she prepared for her brother.

Then he heard the sound of water being kissed repeatedly by the wide surface of the skipping stone before it trailed off. Then the same rhythm echoed again.

He approached the door facing the yard before he lean to the wall with his arms crossed over his broad chest. He watched amusedly

Toshimi worked out her anger as she throw the skipping stones harder than the previous one.

"You're still sulking?"

She gave him a death glare before she throw another skipping stone onto the water. "What's sulking?"

She heard him laugh before he returned to the room and shut closed the door, leaving her alone in the yard by the small lake.

She whirled to the closed door, staring in disbelief that he had just shut her out, instinctively stoking her anger. "Don't get surprised," She picked up another small stone and lift her hand high on her side, "If you see me at Kyoto later." She mumbled before she throw it straight to the closed shoji door.

"Aww!"

She closed her gaping mouth with her hands, while her eyes shone with anticipation.

The door with the small hole flung opened, revealing a shirtless man with only his waist down covered with his grey hakama.

Sano lifted the stone in his hand, "You gave me stone?" He asked as his eyes widened in disbelief on her childish play. His another hand rubbed his shoulder to easen the slight pain.

A guilty smile arched on her face before she began to wear the abandoned slippers just near the lake, preparing herself to flee from the battlefield. Sano realized this then in one hop he was down on the same ground as her.

His golden eyes suddenly glinted diabolically. "You should know the consequence of your doing before you even think of it." He approached her barefooted before she was able to escape. Watching his face flooded with desire just like last night, she pointed her fingers over his shoulders in attempt to escape him, "Oh! Father." She bowed slightly, pretending his old man was there.

Automatically Sano straightened his body and turned to his back while Toshimi already started her engine and ran towards the back door of the compound when suddenly someone's voice stopped her.

"Toshi-nee!" Naru was running from the other side of the yard while panting harshly. Her small hands rested on her knees as to caught up her breath. Both of them automatically turned their attention from each other to the panting niece.

"What's wrong, Naru?" She slowly approached Naru, despite of the stare she sensed from Sano, she crouched down to meet her eye level while Sano approached them from behind, his hands on his hips, but his eyes narrowed in dissatisfaction to his mischievous wife.

"Tohru-nee... she... fall down from the stairs..." Sweats ran down from her temple to her cheek, skin slightly pale from her breathless marathon to reach them. Toshimi frowned, waiting patiently for her to finish while she already sensed something not good is happening to

the eight month pregnant woman.

"She's... bleedin' heavily, Sensei!" She exclaimed with a panic face, stressing the word sensei as to call for her expertise in handling blood. Toshimi arched a smile for her.

"Good job, Naru." She patted her head before stood up. "Rest up for now, I'll go there myself." Naru nodded obediently and step aside as to give way for her.

She began to walk but her pace thwarted as her hand was pulled to the back.

"Toshimi." A deep and concerned voice echoed from behind her.

"Yes?" She turned to him quizzically.

"I'm leaving in an hour." His eyes locked to hers as he reminded her to be at the port before he leave. "Make sure to be there, okay?" He spoke slowly, his voice dripped with hope; to see her for the last time before he set sailed to the ocean, back to their new assigned place, Kyoto.

Her gaze dropped, remembering how mad she was when he told her she will stay here until he comes back.

If he ever comes back.

She know well enough what sort of future she hold when her brother told her to marry a samurai in this turbulent age. Who knows, she'll never meet him again after his final goodbye, or she'll be force to see her own husband being beheaded in the middle of the crowd with his baby in her womb and counting the days for the child to be born fatherlessly.

It hurts even when she imagined it, let alone the one who bares it.

She know she have to be strong for both of them, so she decided to let her anger off for now and let him go alone, if that was what he desired. Hesitant but willingly, she stepped forward, closing the gap between them before she tiptoed and kissed him on the cheek, causing him to quirk a sheepish smile on his face.

And she knew she won't be able to wave him goodbye at the port or watching him slowly disappearing from her view.

"Take care of yourself." She patted his head with a comforting smile on her lips, as if he was a little child begging for consolation from his mother. "I'll be waiting for you."

Then he tightened his grip on her hand, as if don't want to let her go. "You're saying you won't be able to send me off?" His voice was low and deep when it reached her ears and it sent her chill watching the taut on his face.

He watched her dumbfounded face before grabbing her chin with his fingers and lifted it to meet his eyes.

Her eyebrows raised in bafflement, wondering what he wanted to do



when he spun his head to Naru, "Naru, close yer eyes."

"Huh? Why should I?" Naru rebuked, "It's fun watchin' Toshi-nee an' Sano ji-chan talkin' to each other." The little girl whom sat on the pouch rested her chin on her palms since their conversation started seconds ago. "Go on. I won't disturb." The fervent smile still lingered on her face.

Sano grinned, "Fine then. Watch on yer own risk." He turned back to her wondering face before he crushed his lips to hers.

"Omo!"

Naru closed her eyes with both of her hands tightly.

Toshimi widened her eyes in surprised.

Sano wrapped her body in protective embrace.

Tohru was screaming in pain in her house.

Yes. Forgotten.

\* \* \*

><p>"Ah, excuse me, miss."<p>

She lifted her face from inspecting the long grass on the ground when a voice of a man greeted her. Still remain crouching, she feigned a sweet smile as her business of finding her master's necklace was disturbed, "Yes, can I help you?"

Souji arched his eyebrow as soon as the woman's beautiful face came into view.

The sounds of cicadas singing filled the forest atmosphere.

"Did you somehow see an orange cat running this way?" He pointed his finger on where he stood.

"A cat, huh?"

He saw her rolled to her feet then straightened her slightly ruffled orange kimono with her hands.

Then he saw a rare beauty mark under her right purple eyes.

She shrugged her shoulder, "I don't think I have seen one." Another smile, but a genuine one. "Sorry."

He chuckled. "It's okay. I'll be going." He waved at her before walking deeper into the forest.

She watched him walking leisurely with her eyes twitched amusedly, "He's going straight to the boar few meters ahead." Later her eyes caught the swords he carried on his left waist.

'So he's a samurai. Shouldn't worry about him though.' She surmised wryly before resuming searching for the lost necklace.

Souji turned slightly to his back to peek on the woman, "She's quite an oblivious, is she? \_She\_ was the cat I'm talking about." He wore a smirk as he continued to walk in the forest for a stroll.

'But what does a woman doing in a forest like this?' He thought inwardly.

All at once, he caught a rustle sounds from the bushes few feet ahead from him.

\_Ba-thump!\_

He don't know why but he has a bad feeling about this.

Then the moving creature revealed itself to him.

A black, furry body with extended nose, complemented with short horn on its head-viola!

A perfect match to his child nightmare.

"B-boar?" His body shivered with cold as his eyes locked with the hungry animal. He took a step a back, the boor took a step forward.

'Darn it! Why it have gotta be me of all people?' He thought ruefully.

The boar took another advance step forward as he slowly backing away. Cold sweat was running down on his face.

'Wait! That woman-'

\_Meanwhile...\_

Kimigiku rested with her legs crossed on the stone as she chew the sweet white essence of bamboo in her hand.

Then her sharp nose twitched.

She threw her gaze deep into the place where the man disappeared before. A hearty smile arched on her lips.

"He's coming. With a female boar."

She decided to kill her time by watching the humorous scene unfolding before her as she picked another bamboo she had cut into slices before and brought it to her mouth.

"Run!"

From afar, he saw the woman in the orange kimono was sitting leisurely on the big rock.

"Run!"

"Ah. There he is." Remembering how cocky his face was when she first saw him and comparing what she was seeing now, made her heart tickles.

"Run away, woman!" Souji ran straight to the leisure woman with a panic face.

"Oh! Don't come here." She saw he making his way straight to her. She jumped off the rock with a swift hop and Souji was getting nearer.

She sighed vexingly, preparing herself to disappear with smoke but then she remembered she had a kimono on her body. She sighed again while begin to back away as Souji only few step away from her.

Grab!

"Why did you spacing out right there?!" His breath race along with his voice.

"Why did you brought the boar here?!" Her hand was gripped firmly in his hand as they ran in wind speed side by side.

"Why?! Cause I don't want to have the fun all by myself." He smirked wryly to her. "I'm giving some to you."

"Tch. Fun, huh?" She threw her gaze to the back and saw another male boar had join the party.

"Oh! They added in number!"

"Darn it!"

Kimigiku unraveled her hand from his, but grabbed his hand instead. "Follow me!"

She pulled him to her two o'clock vector where she knew there was a place to hide under the ground.

But her hand was pulled back to the opposite direction. "No, it's this way!"

The predators were getting nearer.

She pulled back his hand, "It's this way I tell you!"

But their hands were separated as both of them were pulling each others' hands.

The male boar was running after her with grunting noise.

"Darn you animal!" Souji speedied his pace to catch up to her.

She drew out a senbon from her black tight under her kimono as she keep her pace steady for a while. She took a glance to the big, black animal behind her, "You left me no choice then."

As she was aiming for the vital point of the boar, his hand was back on hers, grabbing tightly, the sharp needle in her hand fall to the ground.

"Jump to my back!" He directed her to hop on his back so he'll carry her all the way to the safe place.

"What?!"

Watching a samurai lending a help to a shinobi like her, it may stain the pride she bare as the one who act beyond the shadow, but-

"C'mon! What are you waiting for?!" His voice peaked as he turned slightly to her on his back.

"I'm thinking!" Her purple eyes met his emerald one as she replied.

"What kind of think you're doing when the boar almost kisses your butt?!"

The boar pushed its nose to her back.

"ARGH!" She screamed instinctively before throwing herself on Souji's back.

Souji grabbed her knees on his sides tightly as she wrapped her hands around his neck.

"Faster!" She cried as the boar kissed her back for the second time.

"Hang on!" He moved to the third gear as he tightened his grip on her knees.

They were gaining distance from the hungry animal as Souji speed up but then-

"Uh-oh." His feet failed to stop and trampled at the edge of the cliff before falling down the steep surface.

\* \* \*

><p>"Where's Souji?" Hijikata asked the three captains sitting on the bench outside the shop as he excused himself from the tense argument inside the shop, leaving Kondo alone in handling the stubborn Serizawa Kamo.<p>

There's a dango in Shinpachi's and Heisuke's hands, except for Saito whom was taking a sip of tea.

Still munching, "He said he want to take a stroll in the garden back there." Heisuke pointed his thumb on his back, directing to the green hill at the back of the shop.

Hijikata frowned. "That's not a garden. It's a forest." He sighed. "And lots of boars in that place."

Shinpachi burst out laughing, "Bhahaha. If that so, he is probably taking a stroll together with the boars." He can't imagine Souji who is fond of cats, is taming the boars to walk together with him in the forest. "Or he probably had done it."

Saito put his cup on the table and stood up. "Hijikata-san, I'll go check on him." He rested his hand on the hilt of his sword on his

right waist.

Hijikata nodded and sat on the bench opposite to them and put a dango into his mouth.

"Yes, please do, Saito. But don't take it so long. We'll be moving to our next place to settle in right after Kondo-san finished conversing with him." He explained as three pairs of eyes watching him attentively.

"Understood, Hijikata-san."  
><strong><br>End of chapter 9\*\*

Dragonmaster789: Thank you! I'm glad there's someone like my story. Here a cookies for you!

Thanks for the wait! I'll try to update once in three days since I'm in semester break. But... err.. I'll try though..

As always, reviews are most welcome!

Bye!

## 10. Toshimi's Pregnant?

Two months later...

\*\*01:23 am\*\*

He heard the sound of footsteps at the hallway for the second time at the same night. Once again, he threw the torn fish net in his hand to the floor and peeked out to see who it was from the slightly opened shoji door.

"Toshi-nee? Yer again? What-"

His queried died when his sister-in-law ran passed him hastily before entering the bathroom at the end of the hallway and locked it from inside.

"... 's wrong?"

He stared quizzically on the closed-door for a moment before silently nodded in realization, his hands crossed over his chest, "I knew it 'er stomach can't stand the spicy dishes durin' dinner."

Then he resumed his business of fixing the net, the door of his room remained open a bit. 'So maybe she suffered from stomach ache?' He thought again when the door of the bathroom remained closed. He peeked again at the door of the bathroom as he hardly hear any sound from it since minutes ago.

He ran his fingers on his red hair as he let out a heavy sigh. Then he rolled to his feet. The net once again was left neglected on the floor.

\* \* \*

><p><em>"Sei, I entrusted ya to take care of the village's well-bein'

while I'm gone. Yer know yer the only one I can hope for." Sano placed his hand on his brother's shoulder while their amber eyes were long swallowed by each gulping waves, disrupting the gentle flow of water thus creating new waves of current as it slammed the shore.<em>

\_He shifted his eyes from the upcoming wave and brought it to his brother, "Very well. But I have one condition." Sei agreed but added another terms in their agreement.\_

\_Sano looked at his matured little brother, a total transformation from the last time he left him. All the turbulent and tumultuous he faced in his young age while all of his friend still shilly-shallying about their own future, he already have his own goal and aim in his life; to inherit the business of shipping the fishes throughout the island.\_

\_ 'How time flies...' He surmised dryly, a humorless laugh escaped him.\_

\_ "Oi, d'ya hear me, Sano-nii?" He nudged Sano's ribs with his elbow.\_

\_ "What-no, ain't hear ya." He thought he just missed the moment when he and his late older brother bullied Seishuu almost everyday, and almost everyday their father scolded them with a cane in his hand.\_

\_ "I said, yer hav to promise t'come back 'ere and help me with shipping those fishes to the next village." He sighed, "Father's gettin' specially lousier since yer returned." He rubbed the back of his head as he spoke, agitated.\_

\_He quirked a smile as he stared on Seishuu's vexed face, "Of course I'll come back 'ere and lighten those heavy ass of yours. Do yer think I'm goin' to die out there?" \_

\_The evening ray took turn in flooding the deluged earth, the sun was smiling gleefully from the sky, displaying a natural sketch of seven miscellaneous colours which stood proudly across the vault of the heaven.\_

\_His gaze then caught the name written with the black paint on the side of the big ship owned by the Harada. There were ten to fifteen fishboats moored to the pierside, each ship have their own name, except for their father's ship, but only since few days ago.\_

\_The ship already have a name now.\_

\_Toshimi.\_

\_The sacred beauty.\_

\_They believed it will bring good luck to the caught if they named the ship with their daughter's name. Since their family has lost their daughter-in-law, let alone a biological daughter, the head of the family took no delay in naming the ship as soon as his long-lost son returned home with a wife on his side.\_

\_ "Yer still waitin' fer her?" Sei asked when he saw what was his

brother staring at. \_

\_"I wish I have the time." He replied lowly before he turned to his back, for the last time, silently hoping Toshimi will come to the port in any moment. \_

\_But until the eleventh hour, she didn't managed to send him off.\_\_

\_"Please take care of yer sister, Sei." He patted Sei's shoulder again, bequeathing his other half to his brother's care.\_

\_"I'm countin' on ya."\_

\* \* \*

><p>Now he stood right in front of the door of the bathroom. His hand raised to knocked on the soundless door of the room but hesitated.<p>

He inhaled. 'Since I'm the only capable man in t'house, then...' He thought quietly before he knocked.

"Toshi-nee?"

No answer.

He knocked again. "Toshi-nee?" This time he heightened his voice.

But still no answer from inside. Only the sound of dripping water replied him.

A sudden prick of angst overwhelmed him. "Toshi-nee yer alright? Answer me please." He reached for the doorknob but it was locked. He called for her again, "Toshi-nee, if yer not answering this time then I'll break this door open."

This time there's an answer.

Crick-crick.

Cicadas.

With a vexed face, he slammed the door with his shoulder, two-no three times, the door slammed open while the left side attached to the hinges left hanging on the door frame.

"Oh man..."

He saw her lying on her side on the cold floor, face drained from blood. Blacked out.

He crouched down to the floor, he patted her cheeks, but there was no effect; she still lied there lifeless.

Cold sweat ran down his face, he began to wavered on what he should do next, "Doctor, yes I better call the doc-" He rolled to his feet to search for a doctor before a bitter realization hit him. "Darn it! She's the doctor in t'house!"

Fright deluged him as he ruffled his red hair roughly with his hands, uncertain.

It's because his eyes had spotted another frightening sight from her.

There were brick-coloured fluid crawling from under her hips.

"Just what happened to yer wife right 'ere, Sano-nii?" He whispered desperately before he gathered her in his arms and exited the bathroom.

**\*\*In Kyoto (at the same time)\*\***

"Achoo!"

Sano rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. The uneasiness he felt since an hour ago faded for a moment.

"What's wrong, Sano-san? Did you catch a cold?" Heisuke peered to his face as they sit at the stairs of the entrance of the main hall, counting for the countless stars in the lightless night.

He remained silent as he heedlessly stood up from the stairs. His chest constricted, he felt bothered, alarmed, anxious and restless. As if something bad is happening out of his range of willpower.

"What's wrong with him?" Shinpachi settled on Heisuke's side. He unarmed the sword and put it on his left side. His shift in the night patrolling just ended swiftly.

Heisuke shrugged his shoulder, "I don't know." The young man seemed like he wanted to care but he don't know how.

Shinpachi's azure eyes wondered on Sano's broad back, he was resting his hands on his waist as he stood before them, and then his gaze went back to Heisuke's puzzled face.

He cracked a laugh and hit Heisuke's head with his big hand.

"Awww! What was that for?!" He growled, his hand rubbed the back of his head.

"Bhahaha! I forgot I'm talking to a kid. Of course ya don't know what is he worrying about." He laughed incredulously.

"So what if you know?! Do ya really have to hit me?!"

"Of course I have to. That's undoubtedly needed for your growth." He reasoned unreasonably.

"What? Hitting the head? What kind of growth-" Heisuke's suddenly smirked evilly, "No wonder you have that kind of brain, Shinpat-san."

Sano let out a sigh before he leave the bantering captains without glancing back. Both Heisuke and Shinpachi stopped pulling each others' neck and hair as they noticed Sano left them



wordlessly.

"This is bad." He let go Heisuke's neck and sat back properly on the stairs. His elbows propped on the stair two level higher than where he seated.

"So what is he worrying about, Shinpat-san?" He pushed his neck to both sides as to relieve the previous tension. "I don't think he's worrying about the outbreak of rogue samurai in the town earlier."

"Of course it's not, you brat." He spat his words as he narrowed his eyes vexedly to him. His eyes wandered to the night sky. "It's about our long-lost physician. Ahh... maybe we won't be able to meet her again. How pity." He shook his head ruefully as Sano's silhouette disappeared beyond the building.

Heisuke finally nodded in realization. "Oh it's about Toshimi-chan, then? But, what do you mean we won't be able to see her again?"

He exhaled deeply before replying, all at once he started to straighten out, "Knowing Sano for these two years, he was a man of... ya know, overprotective and all, especially towards women, and I just realized this something when Sano decided to marry her." He stopped for a moment, discerning his junior's baffled face. "And when he told me he's going to leave Toshimi at his parent's place, I know that was the right decision."

Heisuke nodded silently, starting to digest what he's going to say, "Sano-san was just trying to protect her in his own way." He remembered when Toshimi was deadly injured few months ago, he had never seen Sano's face was gravely somber for few days; he was blaming himself for what had happened to her. Then right after she regained her consciousness, he took no delay in asking the Vice-Commander for Toshimi's hand in marriage.

And fortunately, Hijikata forthrightly let go of his sister to one of his trustable captain.

Shinpachi nodded in assent, agreed with what their Vice-Commander had told them few months ago. "Just like Hijikata-san said, this is no place for women."

Heisuke neither nodded nor denying, "To think that Sano-san has someone to take care of at his hometown, it must be hard for him to leave her and stay here, huh?" It's not a question rather it was a bitter realization.

"And to think that one of us have someone to called as wife, I just can't believe it."

Heisuke stared wickedly to Shinpachi, "I cannot say that to Sano-san. But to you, Shinpat-san, I absolutely cannot imagine that."

**\*\*08:32 am\*\***

Naru since half an hour ago have accompanied her sleeping aunt in her room. The morning breeze was damp and cool, signaling there was an evident monsoon change of the island weather.

"Toshi-nee, wake up. It's mornin' already..." She pouted as she stared endlessly to her ghastly face. Her fingers fiddled with the futon.

Alternately, she watched her grandparent conversing with a straight face with an older woman whom she heard to be a midwife outside of the room.

"Why grandpa and grandma so serious this mornin'?" The little girl began to pay her attention to her, "Toshi-nee, are yer sick? Is it because Naru put the larvae in yer kimono yesterday?" She sniffed, trying to contain her cry, "I promise I won't do it again, Toshi-nee... Wake up please..."

"...larvae?" Her body flinched suddenly as her eyes fluttered open.

"Toshi-nee!"

Her sudden cry alarming her grandparents, both rushed into the room followed by the midwife.

"Toshimi-san?! Are yer alright?" The worried mother hastily approached her side, gently stroking her hand.

Her dazed eyes turned to her mother-in-law on her right side and to her niece on her other side. The very sight threw her back to her first meeting in the island; she had been in this kind of situation before, except the people slightly different, the room still the same, and the weather is quite different from on that time, and there's also one distinct differences; Sano wasn't there on that island.

The midwife moved besides Naru, the mother signaled to Naru to give way for the midwife and she reluctantly left her seat with a pout.

"How a'yer feelin', Toshimi-san?"

Feeling rather guilty when she unknowingly had caused this much disturbance, she tried to lift her heavy head, trying to show them she was fine, although her whole body speaks otherwise. "I'm okay-" The midwife pushed her shoulder back to the futon gently, "Yer not okay, my dear. Yer not okay." The midwife shook her head as her hand rested on her shoulder.

Her repeated statement aroused the confusion within her, "What happened to me?" She felt the world around her started to spin in each tickling seconds.

She could barely hear the midwife's voice as she felt something is bloating up inside her, forcing to escape through her dried throat.

"Toshimi?"

**\*\*In Kyoto\*\*   \*\*(at the same time)\*\***

He ran for the nearest drain, unable to contain the churning substances in his stomach.

He threw up.

He used the stone wall as leverage as he emptied his stomach.

A minute later, "That Shimpachi, he should be forbidden from entering the kitchen from now on." He growled as he cleaned his mouth from the well at the backyard.

**\*\*In the dinner hall\*\***

"Shinpat-san, I don't know Sano-san can't stand your cook to the extent of throwing up. Did you put poison in his burnt food?" Heisuke turned slightly to Shimpachi on his left side while munching the smoked fish, the tail left hanging from his mouth.

"Nope. I put it in yours." He replied tersely. He wore rather a calm demeanour when his own stomach started to feel funny, "Who told him to leave Toshimi-chan at his hometown? Now we lose our beloved delicious cook." He mumbled under his breath while trying his best to swallow the overcooked rice.

Souji chuckled, "Sano-san sure know how to make things his."

"Okita-san, Toshimi-chan is not a thing." Heisuke disagreed, a slight frown formed on his face.

"It's called metaphor, Heisuke-kun if you missed my meaning." Souji pointed his chopsticks smugly to Heisuke which sit across him.

"So the orange cat was a metaphor too?"

Everyone fell silent for five seconds, unable to decipher what Saito had said. Except for Souji.

"I've wondered, lately both of you have talked about this orange cat. Orange cat do that, orange cat jump there. And I can sense somehow, this orange cat is not literally a cat. Am I right, Souji?" The Vice-Commander glanced to the restlessness in the first captain division that almost surfacing under his cool profile.

Souji threw his deadly stare to Saito on his right side, "Hajime-kun, I thought I told you to keep this as a secret, didn't I?" He rested his head in his hand which propped on his thigh, feigning a stormless profile.

"You bribed me with the sweet dango which I specially disfavour. I can hardly accept that." Saito replied placidly, his azure eyes attached on the tofu on his plate as he pinned it between his chopsticks.

Sano opened the door as he entered the hall, his disheveled auburn hair was clear in view.

"So you're saying it's okay to bribe you but only with the things that come into your liking? How awful, Hajime-kun."

"I saw the orange cat and Souji-" Souji stuffed his tofu into Saito's mouth.

"Harada, are you feeling unwell?" The Commander, Kondo greeted the tenth captain division from his visit to the drain, a meaningful smile decorated on his gentle face. All at once, the captains stopped their bantering and shifted their eyes to Sano and back to the Commander.

Sano quirked a reassuring smile, "I'm fine, Kondo-san. It's just I thought the chef should resign from cooking for us in the future." He said tonelessly while glancing to the chef at the corner of his eyes.

A loud smack echoed from Shinpachi's seat, "Hey it's not that awful. Blame your vulnerable stomach for that." He scowled, helplessly trying to defend his skilllessness in the arts of culinary.

Hijikata glanced to Kondo on his side, he can see Kondo has something to say to the fellow captains then another loud smack exploded from his seat, stopping another banter.

"Please continue, Kondo-san." Hijikata said tersely. With that, he regain all of their attentions back to Kondo.

Kondo cleared his throat couple of times before he begin, "When I saw Harada-san got all messy just now, it reminded me of my early marriage."

Instinctively Sano fixed his untidy hair.

"Then?" Souji's eager face was obvious, even Saito on his side emptied his hand to listen to the Commander's tale.

"Haha, eager aren't you?" He took a sip of his drink before resuming, "When my marriage was about six months old, I started to experienced the symptoms which a mother-to-be supposed to have. Like vomiting."

"Huh?"

Six blurred face stared intently to him, excluding the well-mannered Sannan on Kondo's other side. A deep frown formed on their face, especially Sano who was tilting his head to his side, trying his hard to fathom Kondo's remarks.

"When I got home to my wife's place, it surprised me when she told me she was pregnant two months old. You know getting pregnant and all, they all have their own signs, right? Yes, Souji." Kondo gave a hand gesture to Souji when he raised his hand as if a pupil raising his hand to ask his teacher a question, "I know men can never conceive a child but," he scratched his temple oddly, "Why you're the one who having that particular symptoms?"

At that very moment, disbelief was engulfing Sano's face, "Impossible... We just did it few times though." He muttered under his breath, never expecting people around him to hear him but Heisuke's and Saito's sharp ears managed to caught his low remarks. A faint blush tainted Haisuke's face and Saito's sensitive ears.

Simultaneously, both of them cleared their throat, attracting couple

of eyes to the both captains.

Kondo cracked a boisterous laugh, "I wouldn't have the answer if you ask me. Some women might experienced the dizziness and all but not vomiting. The husbands will endure it for them instead. But I don't know in Harada-san's case. It could be a false alarm." His gentle hazel eyes locked with Sano's as he ended.

An amused smile appeared on Hijikata's face, followed by several others.

"So Harada, what do you think?"

**\*\*End of chapter 10\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>Author's note: I don't want to keep apologizing for the late update so this time I have a present for my dear readers. I have published another story where the gallant Kondo Isami will play on the main stage and it will be a short series.<p>

I would love to resume this story but I needed a little motivation to continue this. So if you enjoy the story or you have anything to comment please don't hesitate to leave one, okay? I will highly appreciate it.

Please have a nice day guys!

See ya!

## 11. The Approaching Storm

**\*\*9:00 am, somewhere deep in the forest in the northeast of Japan\*\***

Sen-hime placed a bouquet of wild flowers on the ground under the ramshackle nameless memorial stone. She crouched down, fingers brushing away the dust and dried leaves on the tattered stone which had long rested under the big shady tree. Kimigiku's eyes fixed intently on the fading ancient characters at the center of the stone; Physician of The Yukimura.

Silence accompanied them, both kunoichi and the descendant of Shizuka Gozen offered their prayer for the countless time on the fallen shinobi's resting place, although the dead was not literally there, as the head of Yukimura clan had ordered to bury the body somewhere else concealed, so this is the only place where the live can offer their prayer to the fallen one - to the deaf stone.

"Say, Kimi, I heard she was not the only one who was -you know what I mean- and there's also a man who shared the same misfortune fate on that time, right?" Sen-hime spoke, neither turning her eyes nor body to the female shinobi. She had heard several news about that, when that first aberrant rub out took place, there was also a male shinobi that had met the soul reaper, watched by hundreds of oni whom had gathered to watch the beheading disregard of status and ranks.

The composed female guardian shifted her gaze to her master

expressionlessly, "Yes it was, milady." She replied nonchalantly and simply stopped there, refused to talk more about it.

The swaying leaves of trees sang the melody of nature, occupying their thwarted conversation.

Impulsively, Sen-hime rolled to her feet and turned to Kimigiku, her hands on her waist, "What? Is that all? Tell me more!" Her face contorted in dissatisfaction.

She sighed, "I don't find it necessary, milady. Let's just leave the past behind, shall we?" Her purple eyes shifted to the passing winds, scanning for the change of zephyr, before it went to her master's face, hoping for a thorough comprehension on the subject.

In response, Sen-hime puffed her cheeks out of protest when she refused her for the twentieth time to tell her part of her untold past. Her shoulders slumped, "I guess I can't help it, you're so stubborn when it comes to this." She stomped as she stepped away from the memorial stone, giving the chance for her to converse inwardly with her long perished friend.

In contrary, she was secretly hoping the shinobi would open up a bit to her about the friend whom she hold in respect so much until now.

She watched the austere purple eyes unmoved from the black-silver carved rock. Her own eyes went back to the fading words on the stone.

"Yukimura." Kimigiku's eyes flattered a bit, as her own head trip to the past shattered upon hearing her voice. The bright side of the oni princess suddenly emerged, ceasing the silence of the forest, "In particular, there was fraud and cozenage in every oni clan, that is to attain power, fame and glory, including the Yukimura. I may not know well the details of the tragedy," She stopped and stood facing the deaf rock once again, besides her guardian, "but I know that this is the first catastrophe that fall upon them, before it followed by another, one by one, driven by greed for power until there's no more Yukimura, or the faithful shinobi of Yukimura, leaving the innocent child of the collapsed clan to live on their own. Although I doubt we would meet one out there."

Kimigiku chuckled softly, "You're so keen, milady. Yet you're saying you know so little about it." She glanced at her at the corner of her eyes, amused enough by the witty side of her.

Sen-hime frowned in exasperation, "What? That's not details. That's a general law of the living, ya know." She rolled her eyes on her purposed ignorance. "It's fine if you don't want to talk to me about it, Kimi. But I do believe in one thing," She stopped short and looked at the shinobi in the eyes with a beaming smile, "wherever truth is then justice may prevail."

A small, slow grin quirked on Kimigiku's face, "You do have a point there, milady. But I wonder, how the justice may prevail when the one who had to witness the truth had already ceased?" The tone of her voice suddenly tensed. "Shutting the truth within themselves up until they became one with the earth? Then how will the justice prevail?" She clenched her teeth, struggling to control herself from venting

out her anger indirectly to her master, or speaking ill of the dead.

Sen-hime watched for the first time the beautiful shinobi had ever grew crimson with rage, her hands balled on her sides, clutching the air in her both hands. Carefully, she stroked her forearm, hoping that would soothe her a bit, and when she saw Kimigiku exhaled heavily and arched a reassuring smile to her, then she let go.

"I'm sorry, milady. I let the anger get the better of me." Hoping to avoid her at the moment, she crouched down on the ground, breaking eye contact with Sen-hime. Whenever she visits here, all inhibitions were lost, as if she was meeting and chatting with the real her, standing there face-to-face, having a lazy chat like they used to. Although she was gone countless years ago, the strong friendship that bind them together had never ceased even a bit.

As though she understood her current silent wish, she spoke, "Take your time, Kimi. I'll go take a walk around here." She walked away from the place to give some privacy to secretive shinobi.

Rather than crouching, she sat down in front of the stone. Her purple eyes glued to the dark rock as her heart already whispered her silent greetings.

'I'm here, Hitomi.'

'...It's getting awkward, huh?'

She picked up a pebble on the ground and caressed the rough surface with the tip of her fingers.

'What if... our role switched?'

'You'll have a great contribution to the humankind, be it to oni or to human, that is, if you're still alive.'

'Unlike me, I'm no expertise like you.'

A wide grin arched on her solemn face, 'I would never grow bored in telling you this so I'll be more than happy to repeat the same thing; the old woman you used to treat long ago, just when the sudden epidemic of that unknown disease,' She paused. If possible, her eyes had burnt a hole through the hard stone with the intense gaze.

'With your careful medication and the careful research you held for the undiscovered cure, the old woman managed to prolong her life half of her current age.'

'Do you see that? It's a success!' Her eyes gleamed fervently on the mute stone, like a desperate merchant selling his goods for money to some penniless man to return home to his sick mother.

She swallowed, her smile died, 'But I daresay she's the only survivor of the deadly disease. Your house, was burnt down to ashes a day after your death sentence.'

The cure is no more. It followed its inventor back to the earth.

She swallowed again, this time the nervous had got the better of her,

'Like you said before, there's no evident signs of the illness up until it gone quite advanced, and it would be easily blamed on other diseases, but when you're still alive, I have read your research pertaining the signs in early few months and even years.'

She exhaled heavily and ran her fingers on her silky midnight hair, 'It's hard to believe, but I have found it to be true in my observation among the human in these years since your- and just recently, I stumbled upon a samurai and I saw those signs on him.' The image of the panting chestnut-haired man suddenly popped out in her head.

Her head dropped, hands flattened on the dusty ground, 'How many more should die in order to wait for another curer like you?'

\_No more. She'll be back.\_

Her eyes blinked few times. Dumbfounded.

She cracked a small mocking laugh to herself and shaking her head in disbelief, 'I'm damned already, talking to myself like this. Even my mind started to speak for your stead.' She rubbed her temple as if to get rid of the deep echoed voice in her head.

She rolled to her feet, giving the stone her last gaze before she turned to her back and started to walk away. Her pace came to a halt when a gust of wind rushed in front of her, slapping her face gently as her hair flew to her face.

><em><br>I heard the politics in Kyoto are quite a mess.\_

She whirled to her back almost instantly, swaying sharply the long dark violaceous bandanna around her neck to her back, only to found the stone still remained static on its place. She desperately threw her gaze all around her, eyes scrutinizing for each swaying fresh green leaves on the trees and the moving dried leaves on the ground.

><em><br>You're searching for me? Ya can't see me, ya know... Not just yet.\_

A hint of biting jest was surfacing as the voice trailed off. All this while, she suppressed the shock from grow evident in her face by clenching her jaw, realizing the voice belonged to a man. Not just normal man, an oni.

A high skilled one.

The only living oni whom capable of talking with a shinobi like her without the presence of his physique appearance is-

\_What do you want, Shiranui?\_

The male voice snorted amusedly.

><em><br>Shiranui? You must out of your mind, Kimi.

><em>

>'It's not him? The only living oni whom I know can do this sorts of thing is only him.'  
<br>\_

>You sure don't expect me, aren't ya? That two-faced oni is unable to contact you in such distance. I'm thousands of kilometres away from you, can you guess where I am?<br>\_

>Her face turned as white as ghost, cold sweat ran down her temple,



'This can't be, then the only one I know whom can do such thing... was dead... the same way and the same time as Hitomi died...'<br>\_

>You can't be... Takatsugi?<em>

Yup, it's me.

Shock overwhelmed her, she got goosebumps all over her skin. 'There's no doubt, this voice indeed was his but how did he-'

I'm currently in Ishigaki. I thought of paying a visit to my daughter, then I also heard Hitomi is here. What a small world, huh.

Thump!

\_Hitomi is there?! What are you talking about?! Who am I talking to? Both of you are no more already!

><em>

>She practically screamed inwardly, causing the frown on her face deepened.<br>\_

>Heh. That's kinda harsh, ya know. Hey, I don't have time for this now. Shiranui's coming.<em>

Wait!

Her brain could hardly discern what did she heard, the turmoil in her had past its zenith, making its way up for another peak.

Deep breath.

><em><br>You're saying she is there, so by any chance, does that mean she know who she was?

><em>

>There's a long silence in the other side.<br>\_

>... Nope. She don't. <em>

All along, Kimigiku breathe in exasperation, with a heavy sigh she finally straightened herself. She placed her right palm on the right side of her face, her forefinger rubbing her tense blue-veined temple.

><em><br>I don't understand.\_

If that's what it takes, I'll have to do it.\_

\_What do you mean?\_

\_I'll make her disappear from her current life. Just like how I lose mine two years ago.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>10:00 am, Nanatsutake Village, Goto.<strong>

The mother was busy preparing lunch for her son who usually return from the sea around eleven in the morning. An unusual enthusiastic smile hovered on her face as she cut the cucumber into thin slices for the simple cucumber miso, Seishuu's usual side dish.

"I ain't see nothin' funny in the cucumber."

The mother jumped from her work as the awkward voice of the local accent greeted her from her head trip.

"Toshimi?! Yer not suppose t'be 'ere!" She almost peaked her voice when she saw her daughter-in-law was standing in front of her with a dark brown haraobi around her stomach.

She smiled beamingly, "I'm fine, mother. I thought of helping you for the lunch. Oh." Toshimi backed away a little and traced her hands along the thick dark fabric around her belly and stopped on her waist. "Did I wear this alright?" The plain sash that used to belonged to the mother where she wore it during her pregnancy came into use again.

She smothered a laugh, her hands reached for the sash and slipped to her back and untied it, "Ya wear it upside down, Toshimi, lemme fix it for ya."

She watched her gentle mother-in-law with a mixing feeling, mostly flooded with grateful and happiness beyond words. She don't know how to react to the news from the midwife, maybe because it was too soon for her to become a mother. The news was the last thing she expected from her and she was ready to hear any bad news in case she ever bare a disease, and gladly it wasn't.

There's someone new is about to come in the family.

Even so, she had a quite massive spotting last night and the midwife told her to rest up and stop coming to the village's infirmary until she is fully recovered and ready to work again.

"Ya know what," the mother thwarted her surmise while her hands were dancing skillfully on her back. "I've already know ya expectin' since two weeks ago."

"Eh?! You did? But how?" Her head spun from the neat tied haraobi on her small bulging stomach to the mother's grinning face.

The mother resumed her work in cutting the remnants of the cylinder vegetables on the kitchen's counter when she answered, "I'm no doctor like ya, nor a skillful person in this matter." She deposited the sliced cucumber into an empty porcelain bowl, "but a normal elder like me, we learnt from experience. But I'm sorry I couldn't warn ya earlier 'bout this." Her dark charcoal eyes glistened fondly as it met hers.

'Mother is too kind.' Her heart whispered, a gush of delight and gratefulness deluged her; it's a great relief to have a caring mother-in-law like her.

"It's fine, mother. I'm alright now. I can handle the pain somehow-well if that ever happen again. But mother," she entered the kitchen and headed to the washed chicken eggs in the bowl besides the boiling hot water in the pot, "don't you think it's a little bit early to wear the haraobi?" She spoke while stepping uncomfortably for having a constriction under her belly. She reached for one of the egg and began to crack it with the knife.

"Yes it is but it'll easen the delivery much more later. Oh! Toshimi! Thank you heaven, you got a twin yolk!" The mother practically

exclaimed when she saw a pair of yolk surfacing on the boiling water before it sank to the bottom of the pot.

Both the mother and the pregnant woman peered into the pot, watching the twin yolk gradually being cooked. The mother clamped her hands together and closed her eyes as though she was saying thank you to the heaven. She saw the sudden excitement in the always bright face, she tilted her head quizzically.

"What about it, mother?"

She shifted her excited, delightful face to Toshimi, "This is just like what happened to me when I have Sanosuke and his brother in my womb."

Toshimi brows wrinkled, "What do you mean? Sano and... Sasuke?" She peered again into the pot, the water became thicker as the white fluids of the egg condensed.

The smile on her face grew wider and wider, "When I conceived them, I also had broke an egg with a twin yolk, just like ya."

Them?

The furrow on Toshimi's face deepened.

"I-I don't understand, mother. Who are this 'them'?"

"Those twin I mean, ya silly."

'Those twin? Sano, Sei...?' She shook her head, disagreed with her own notion. 'No, no. Sei is one year younger than me- so that left Sano and-'

Her violet eyes widened.

"Ehhh? You mean...?!"

The mother blinked her eyes few times as she saw the pure surprise on her face, "Ya don't know? Sanosuke and Sasuke are twins. When I have 'em in my womb an' came 'cross this twin yolk, yer grandma said I'm goin' t'have a twin." She told her past heedlessly disregard of the gaping expresssion on Toshimi's face. "And it came out t'be true. Maybe Sanosuke gave ya t'reason that ya have a twin baby, ya don't have a twin in yer lineage, right?. Plus," she gestured her eyes to her slightly bulging stomach, "Bein' a doc ya are, don'tcha think yer stomach is quite bigger ahead of its month?"

The puzzled face of her intensified, there were so much shocking revelation she don't given a chance to react to each one, her eyes grew wide, mouth slightly opened, then she shifted her eyes to her stomach, she stuttered, "I-I don't know.. I only studied it on the paper-I mean the theory so I don't really know the real feeling.. about.. having a bulging belly.." A slight faint crimson stained on her face, she felt like running away and buried the pillow on her face; she felt she wanted to scream in delight.

She was so happy!

She don't care whether it was a twin child or not, having a child is

a blessing enough but when the mother told her that story, she got all goosebumps and she knew she could do nothing more than to grin from ear to ear all day long.

She watched the mother pick the cooked twin yolk egg and put it into a small plate and gave it to her, "Here, eat this later."

Her hands reached for the plate and with a bolt lightning speed she reached for the chopstick in the shelf, "Can I have this now?" Suddenly she was drooling as she saw the fresh cooked egg in her hands.

"Ahh? Sure, why not?"

With a bright face, she exited the kitchen and headed to the pouch at the yard and sat on it, legs swaying few centimetres from ground, the plate resting on her left hand while the right one stuffing the eggs into her mouth.

She watched the vacant vast yard, suddenly an image appeared in front of her, the small Sano and his twin; she didn't know how to imagine him but since they both twin so probably they shared the same traits, so another redhead boy should do.

"Sano must be the one who was bullied by his brother, and maybe the brother put the larvae in his yukata, just like Naru did to me, and he went all berserk, pretending to be cool then eventually cried at the corner of the yard," She could not contain her laughter, "and just by imagine this make me want to laugh all day long..."

Her eyes darted to her belly supported by the sash, there, she saw Sano too. Based on her rough observation, usually, the first child tend to follow most of the father's traits, especially the physical features. So she couldn't help but to imagine another small baby with red hair like the father. And for the first time, she finally admit defeat to the fact that he already owned her mind, her heart, her body and her life.

"If only he's here..."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Roshigumi HQ, at the same time<strong>

"Heisuke, who is that?"

Right on the hallway of the Roshigumi headquarters, a blue haired man walked away from one of the room, he wore rather a calm face, a sword on his left waist, followed by the anxious young captain on his back.

The man stopped his pace when two well-toned guys appeared from one of the room thus bringing for the first encounter with the captains.

"Sano-san! Shinpat-san!"

There stood Sano in the middle of the hallway, his right hand rested on his waist, a fair greeting smile arched on his face, while Shinpachi peered half of his body to the outside when he saw the

injured guy they treated two days ago had recovered seemingly.

The first encounter with the two captains does not gave an effect on him, obviously because he don't care. He bowed his head slightly, then continued to walk passed the man with the red hair. Sano and Shinpachi's eyes both followed his pace when he passed then wordlessly.

"Hey, hold up!" Sano grabbed the back of his collar with his right hand and pulled him backwards, left him hanging on his mercy.

He turned sharply to the guy holding his collar, "Hey, what the hell?! Let go of me!"

A vexed glare flooded on Sano's amber eyes as he asked, "Who is exactly are you?" He tighten his grasp on the man's collar when he struggled to get away from him.

On the back, Heisuke placed his hands on his waist in serve-you-right manner before he voluntarily explained who he is as the man was busy freeing himself from Sano, "He's the guy Serizawa-san picked up on the way to the capital-"

His groan and cry were helpless against him. "Hey!"

"Now that he's finally doing better, he say's he's going to leave."

"Hey! Lemme go!"

All the while, Sano was hearing the kind-hearted captain's introduction about the groaning and wriggling man in his hold. "I see. That might explain why I recognized his face."

"How long are you going to hold onto my collar?! Let go already!" Like a miracle, the man managed to free himself from Sano and backed away facing him, while actually Sano himself undid the grasp on his collar.

"It's great that you're feeling better," Sano congratulated him matter-of-factly while Shinpachi and Heisuke stood behind him, their face were not mad rather they bothered by his attitude, "but I can't say I approve of how you're trying to leave without thanking your benefactors first."

Ego flooded his self-conscience, the guy averted his face from them, "I never asked for anyone's help."

Sano's eyes twitched vexedly followed by a dissatisfied groan.

"Why you...!"

Smack!

The man fall down on the floor, his hand rubbing the fresh bruise on his head, "Ow! Wh-what was that for?!"

If not for Sano's impulse response, Shinpachi would have dislocated the young man's jaw.

The tenth captain division cracked his knuckles, preparing for another blow for the lucky young man, "Regardless of whether or not you asked for help, who do you have to thank for being alive and well?! You owed us for the hospitality we've shown you!"

Shinpachi sighed, relieved above all the man can still chew his food tonight, "You... What's your name?" He eyed him from above as they returned back to the normal greetings.

With an expression he had regretted his rude manner, they expected he would stand up and began introducing himself, but regrettably he's not, "I already told my name to him," he pointed his fingers to Heisuke on the back, still sitting on the floor, "So go and ask him for it."

Crack-crack!

"You sure have gut. Apparently one blow to the nogging wasn't enough." Sano loosen his knuckle for another hit, a smirk hovered on his face for having a rock-headed guy young man in front of him.

"Eh?" The man jumped from the floor and instantly took a defence stance, "Hey, don't hit me over every lil' thing!" He sighed in defeat, again, breaking their eyes contact, "I'm Ibuki. Ryunosuke Ibuki."

Sano crossed his arms over his broad chest, "You should have been a good boy and said that in the first place."

"I wouldn't argue with Sano if I were you. He hold back none when it comes to dudes." Shinpachi commented.

Ryunosuke countered, "If you want to know someone's name, isn't it polite to introduce yourself first?"

Sano snorted amusedly, "Oh? Now you're trying to be a smart mouth with me. But, you're right. It's my bad." He quirked a reconciling smile to the newcomer, "I'm Sanosuke Harada. And this is.."

"I'm Shinpachi Nagakura. And sorry for having those bruise treated rather messily." He heard Inoue-san asked Heisuke to take care of him when he arrived here but then the bruises seemed to swollen rather harshly than before. "Recently, our infirmery attendant was kidnapped, so that's why you only had an amateur treat here." He added with amused face.

"Amateur?"

"Kidnap?"

Their head spunned to Shinpachi's direction.

Choosing not to involve in the bantering, Ryunosuke queried, "So, who am I supposed to thank here?"

After telling him the whereabouts of his saviour, he walked away straight to the designated place, despite the messy appearances on his face.

But not until Sano's voice stopped him, for the second time, "Oi. Ryunosuke, you sure you want to meet him like that? You got an eyewax on your face. As big as Shinpachi's I'd say."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>12:30 pm, Nanatsutake Village, Goto<strong>

"Ji-chan! I've got a reply from Father!"

Naru came running to them in the main room, holding a small paper in her hand. The panting little girl leaped to Seishuu and instantly hand him the paper.

"Here, here! Surprised, huh? I told ya my letter reached th'heaven!" The enthusiastic expression on the child's face glowing so brightly as though she just caught the rare golden beetlehorn.

The munching young man ignored his niece but continue to eat his lunch, "What is it this time, Naru? Can't ya see I'm eatin' right now?"

"Reply? From father?" Toshimi asked her quizzically as she put down the bitter wild root tea made by the mother onto the table.

Naru nodded fervently, "Em!" She left her busy eating uncle and came to her aunt instead and shoved her the paper, "Naru always come to th'beach everyday 'an send this letter in a bottle to th'sea." Toshimi read the content of the letter as she resumed, "I thought Father had forgot 'bout me 'cause he had not replied me fer a long time and-"

Thud!

Seishuu smacked the table with his hand.

The shocked mother flinched and returned the hit to her son's forearm.

"Seishuu? What are yer doin'? Ya startled-"

"Didn't I told ya to not believe in such thing? Anybody could write anythin' in that letter of yours." For the first time, Seishuu's face was red with rage as he yelled to Naru.

Naru could not stand the fiery eyes of his so she averted her raven eyes from him, her head dropped, her fingers fidgeted, "...but Naru just want-"

Seishuu snatched the paper from Toshimi and crumpled it with both hands.

"Sei?!"

The girl's eyes went teary as she watched the message from her 'father' was crumpled and scrunched in Seishuu's hands.

A pearl of tears escaped the dam of her eyes and it mercilessly rolled down her cheek. She sniffed once before she ran out of the room.

"Naru!"

"Let her be. She'll calm down later." Seishuu continued to eat his meal as though nothing had happened. The wrinkled paper was neglected on the floor on his side.

"Seishuu, ya hav to stop doin' that. Yer hurtin' her." His mother warned her, worry flooded the old face as she spoke. Including this time, it had been couple of times since Naru came and brought them the paper containing the reply from her 'father'.

He heaved a heavy sigh, chopsticks lied back down on the table, "It's because I don't want t'hurt her I hav to stop her from doin' it again." He paused, "I'll find that brat 'an I'm goin' to beat him into pulp and I'll make him my bait fer my fishes."

Across the table, Toshimi watched him with anxiety washed over her face. Now she finally knew what did she do when she persistently went to the beach everyday, she thought she goes there to play but actually, she was conveying her love to her late father.

She missed him.

And for someone who did that for their own entertainment...

She cracked her knuckles with a determined face, "He'll be death of me for making her cry."

**\*\*End of chapter 11\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's note: Finally, another chapter! This took me full three days to write this and now my head is hurt :'( btw I hope you recall the scene where Sanosuke and Shiranui were found last under the tree, when Shiranui said it reminded him of someone named Takatsugi whenever he sees Sanosuke. This scene inspired me a lot and I hope you can catch up who Naru's father is because he'll be one of the major character in the story later. Oh, and about the twin yolk stuff, I didn't make it up because that was what happened to my mother when she conceived my twin brothers and I have once broke an egg with a twin yolk! Aww! I'm so excited XD hehe <strong>

**\*\*Special thanks to Dragonmaster789 :D The more I tried to get rid of the story from my mind, the more ideas coming into my head, and actually I'm quite glad for that :)\*\***

**\*\*Erika: here you go! Another chapter :D\*\***

**\*\*Reviews are always appreciated,\*\***

**\*\*toshimi-chan \*\***

## 12. Nightmare Returns

\_I know who you are,\_

\_And I know where you are,\_



\_Or what are you reading at the moment, \_

\_But there's one thing you don't have clue about. \_

\_Who is there on your back? \_

\_There, he's waving over your shoulder. \_

\_He's calling fer ya. \_

\_Turn around. \_

\_Don't wanted to? \_

\_There's nothin' n'way. \_

\_Pretty lame, huh? I know I know -- \_

\_Never reply this letter once ya read. \_

\_And if you do... \_

\_I'll kill ya 3 (I'm puttin' a love sign 'ere if ya can't read it) \_

"What the heck is that?" Shiranui sat on the edge of the cape facing the red descending sun at the end of the line of the sea, then snatched the paper from the man that almost die from laughing so hard on his side.

Five seconds later,

"Bhahahaha! What is wrong with this letter? I mean what is wrong with the writer? It's so damn absurd!" He was laughing at his heart's content, hands pressed on his stomach when Takatsugi took back the paper and read back each line with a clearly tickled face, casting an amused smile on his lips.

"I mean-hey, Taka, don't you find it amusing? Who in the world would warn to kill someone then put a love sign like this? And what's wrong with this nonsense creepy message when his true message only lies on the few last lines? Ahh.. I knew it. Is this some kind of chain letter? This must be a mischievous kid's doing-" His never-ending blabbing halted when the man whom bare the short dark auburn hair that barely passed the neckline of his black jinbei interjected, "This is not a boy's doing. It's an adult's. How can a kid write the kanji character so efficiently like this? Besides," Shiranui peered his face on the paper again only to found the complex character on the paper. He then lifted his eyes quizzically to meet a small relieved smile on his face when he's not resuming.

"Besides what? Your mother wrote this?"

"Idiot." He chided. "My mother doesn't even know how to read." He paused, "It's my brother."

He looked at Takatsugi, "Your brother? Hmm.. Just like you, I say." He winked his eyes 'adorably' as he pronounced the magic word, "I'll kill ya!"

He rolled his eyes in disgust, "I'll really kill you, Shiranui."

A moment passed, his eyes went to few hundred meters down to the deserted beach where there was only occupied by a little girl sitting facing the sea on the scattered black stones just a level higher than the sand, her knees on her chest. Her raven eyes were long bewitched in the endless gulping waves.

Shiranui's eyes followed where his eyes went to. Then he broke the silent with a snort, his hands went to back of his head than he landed on the ground, legs lifted from swinging few hundred meters away from the ground, left leg was crossed on his bended right leg, "You mean that girl's uncle? Good thing you know someone is watching over her."

Takatsugi nodded in response. "This is the one thing I wanted to clarify about when I came here. So, my business here is done. Ah. That aside," he turned his face to the blissful oni on the ground, "Shiranui, why do you wanna follow me all way here? Didn't the West's boss searching for ya?"

His eyes closed, not interested in the topic, "He's just interested in finding a bride as his main goal but now he's pathetically mingling with the human's dirty politics to repay blahblah so now he was siding with blahblah." He sneered, "Just one thing to say; I'm not interested in any of those. I'm just a wanderer, in the past, now and then."

"So you're saying you're living an aimless life? That suits you pretty well."

He shrugged his shoulder, "Well, almost next to nothing, I'd say. Say, Taka, I've been wondering," his voice turned the lazy chat to a serious one.

"What?"

He exhaled, "You have almost everything now. The thing I crave the most for all these years. A home... to return to." He finally confessed one of his goal in his wayward life. "So I don't understand. Why did you chose to abandon it all?" He asked matter-of-factly, the first thought that appeared in his head after he learn his plan to avenge Yukimura Kodo for betraying them when the oni still have their own territory and its guarded royal palace.

Takatsugi saw his brother, Seishuu was walking towards the shore for Naru, probably coming to fetch her home, together with the woman he had met few days ago.

"Go on ahead and wait for me a little longer. You know how my current circumstances are. Then once it settled, I'll caught up to you."

It's hard for him to admit but the most shocking news he ever heard after the death of his wife is that he and Hitomi shared a very close relationship in their second life.

She got married to his twin brother, Sanosuke.

In another word, they are family.

And based on their accidental meeting, she seemed to already remember all her memories about their past. To his shock, she remained collected although he knew the unexplainable mark on her back and his back starting to disturb their life ever since.

"Why are you pretending you're dead? You're torturing yourself, you know, you're unable to watch your daughter without a distance. When will all of this end? Until you meet another life?" Shiranui looked at him at the corner of his eyes as he remained lying on the ground. A hint of sarcasm heavied on his remarks.

"When we meet her three days ago," Refused to answer him directly, he countered him with what has happened few days ago, "she didn't seem a little bit distracted when she learn about it. She looked rather..."

"Happy? Is that you wanted to say? Of course it's because she have a baby to take care of. As for my records, both you redheads are always productive in producing child," he mentioned both Takatsugi and his brother, Sanosuke whom he met in Edo few months ago, "defeating me although I had lived much longer than both of you. Do you have any tips perhaps?" He asked smugly.

Takatsugi turned his body slightly to Shiranui, the black jinbei on his sturdy build rustled thus exposing his tanned broad chest, "Quit from associating with demons and quietly settle down with a woman you love. That's all."

"And that's my point, Taka. Why bother yourself with the demon's affair in the human world when you already have everything you need in your life?"

He shook his head, then sighed, "I want to ask you something."

Shiranui jumped from the ground and sat, he smirked, "You still have a problem in answering personal questions, I see." When he first met him and started to get well with him, he registered the man before him tend to speak in roundabout and eventually never meet the exact answer. But he can see why, being asked about one's personal life when he himself was so rare got involved to it might dazed him off of his current track.

"No, I'm not. Blame yourself for asking so much questions in the first place." He defied with a frown.

Shiranui waved his hand in mocking expression, "Right, right. Don't make me wait, will ya?"

He exhaled in return, "Never mind. I changed my mind." He suddenly stood up.

"What-"

His big hands unruffled his jinbei, "I can't be long here. I told you I've already secure a position as one of the Aizu high official." His slippers made a shriek sound as he turned to the opposing direction,

but quickly halted, a smirk laid across his face, "I have learnt there's quite a chaos among the clans in Kyoto. Care to share with me later?" The fact that now Shiranui is now one of the Satsuma's associate was an extremely important upperhand he could have; Satsuma and Choushuu clan was found having quite a conflicting relationship with one another. This might help him to further his still concealed mission somehow in the future.

"So you'll meet your late master's fiance then?" He asked, pointing about the relationship between Tsunade-hime where Takatsugi and Hitomi have their loyal to with the most powerful oni in the West, Chikage Kazama.

"Yup. Definitely."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Two and half months has passed...<strong>

"There you are."

She whirled to her back when a small gust of dust hit her feet, the person she was waiting for landed on her feet silently. She flashed the woman a toothy grin, forming a pair of dimples on her cheeks, "How is it?"

She asked but she actually knew it went well as she saw a small pouch on her waist. It may undoubtedly contain the items she asked for.

The woman who bare the beauty mark under her right eye returned the greeting smile but it quickly subsided as she scrutinize her face, "You seemed exhausted. Are you okay?"

Instinctively she covered her cheeks with both hands and patted it slowly as if to chase away the weariness off of her face.

"I'm alright. Maybe the weather exhausted me a bit." She replied when another autumn breeze ruffled their both black strands.

She huffed amusedly, "Is that so? By the way, I met your man at the HQ, he is quite handsome, I say," she paused, wanting to see the response from her, secretly teasing her for the future references, only to find she was grinning widely despite the visible tired feature on her face, she smiled in response then continued, "so I can understand why you've gotten so pretty."

Toshimi chuckled, "I don't know whether you're praising me or otherwise. So, do you have it?" Her eyes beamed on the pouch that now rested in her hand.

Kimigiku handed over the pouch to her, "Here. Besides the two items you asked me, I got a few other scrolls pertaining on the subject."

Toshimi pulled out the familiar bloody scroll and unrolled it promptly. Eyes contemplated on the swollen ink, a satisfied grin quirked on her face when she registered it was the same one as what she has stole few months ago, then she rolled back the scroll and put it back into the pouch.

"Thank you, Kimi. I can't do this if you weren't here. Here, have some dried squids before you go back." Now it was her turn to give the bag in her hand to her.

"Dried squids?" Kimigiku's eyes widened, whom actually quite disfavor of seafood but she accepted it however.

"Yup. Dried squids in this island are so good. It would be a shame if you don't try some. I really wanted to eat some of those but I can't," her eyes and hands went to the bulge of her stomach, followed by Kimigiku's purple one, "they say it's not good for the baby."

Kimigiku's eyes dropped, unable to hold her gaze on her, "Hito-Toshimi, are you sure you want to carry the child? Despite what had happened to you these last few months?" She recalled that she had told her about how her body reacted to the baby in her womb, and how she concluded all of it could actually implied to.

Her body is rejecting the baby.

Then she heard she heaved a heavy sigh, "I know you're concern about me, but I already made my resolve," both their lavender eyes locked firmly, "I'll give birth to this child even my body rejected it. No matter what happens. Besides," she paused unconsciously forcing a sad smile, "I'm not sure I would have this chance again in the future."

\* \* \*

><p>The night has arrived since Kondo-san, Hijikata-san and Sannan-san went to Serizawa-san's place for an urgent meeting, saying there's an important man came to aid the Roshigumi under Serizawa-san's request, or so they say.<p>

"They're taking forever. What do you think Kondo-san and the guys are talking about?" Heisuke suspiciously inquired, more to asking himself because all of them in the room were currently inquiring the same thing.

"Orders from Shogunate, huh? Smells fishy." Shinpachi stated with the same tone as Heisuke.

The oldest man among the swordsmen, Inoue-san then spoke, "We have Isami-san and Toshi-san. I doubt they will allow things to go astray." The gentle man that had long knew both of them put his trust fully to them, believing there's nothing harm will happen as long as the Commander and the Vice-Commander are there.

At the hallway, Ryunosuke was busy brushing the dust from his legs when Souji asked him, "Ibuki-kun, shouldn't you be massaging Serizawa-san's shoulder by now?"

Easily mistaken Souji's remarks as sarcastic and mocking, he turned his head sharply into the room, glaring his eyes, "He told me to stay here until they finish talking." He clicked his tongue, "Tch, it's not that I wanted to be here-"

"ARGHHHHHHH! "

A loud horrified scream echoed in the tranquility of the night.

Up in the other block of the compound, one man was grasping the fading color of his hair, his knees bent on the floor, eyes bulging from its socket, a fiery blazing red light was surfacing in his eyes.

The squinted eyes Vice-Commander, Niimi, Sannan-san and the head of the Roshigumi, Serizawa-san were watching from a safe distance from the man inside of the abandoned block turning into a Fury. In the meantime, Hijikata-san and Kondo-san were watching with cold sweats ran down their face at the outside of the storeroom.

Meanwhile, the one whom the Aizu dispatched for the Roshigumi, Kodo Yukimura was standing quite far away from both of them, silently witnessing the corrupting potion starting to give effect.

From a few blocks from the place, the residence of the Roshigumi headquarters quickly rushed to the source of the alarming cry.

"What was with that scream?" Heisuke and the others dashed to the source of the voice until they met the currently closed gate of the block.

"Something serious is going down!" Shinpachi was the second in the row before they reach the gate of the block. Heisuke hold the the locks at the center of the wooden gate and ransacking on it but to no avail.

"It won't open!" He exclaimed in frustration.

"ARGHHHHH!"

Another unusual inhuman cry came from behind the door.

"Damn! What happened to him?!"

Sano's face twitched in turmoil, sensing something exceptionally not right when the cry he had once heard before reached his ear again.

\_That scream... I have a bad feeling about this.\_

Roughly and almost forcefully, "Move it, Heisuke!" Shinpachi pushed Heisuke away from the door then with almost the strength of three men, he broke through the gate just in one charge, then the door flew open roughly. Without delaying, Shinpachi, Heisuke and Souji rushed into the compound, leaving Saito, Inoue-san, Sano and Ryunosuke behind. Their silhouettes then engulfed beyond the door of the compound.

Saito turned to his back, "Gen-san, look after things here." Then he shifted his face to Sano, "Sano, please secure the front."

"Got it!"

With that, he dashed into the compound, moving forward with a running pace, his hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

Urged by his curiosity, Ryunosuke perched to the frame of the gate, wanting to get in but thwarted when a voice stopped him.

"Even if you want to tag along, you'll just get in our way." The voice might sound ridiculing but it was pretty dangerous for him if he incapable of wielding a sword in case he encountered a fatal enemies. The owner of the remark, Souji quickly followed Saito's track then disappeared beyond the doors of the blocks.

"Wh-what was that?! He rebuked but immediately stopped by Sano and quickly he was dragged to the front gate together with the captain of the tenth division.

Another long cry echoed again from the compound. Sano already prepared at the front gate, he tightened his hold on his spear when the wild thud and loud clashing of swords erupted from inside. Cold sweats on his skin felt cold when the night breeze hit his face. Fright deluged him. His heart beating hard against his chest. He wasn't scared of facing the still unseen creature but the atmosphere and the memory of the first night of his wedding emerged in his head again.

\_Is this... has something to do with her?\_

He couldn't afford to think more about this; he hadn't gone back to her almost five months and half, but it's not that he didn't want to go back but-

\_Damn! I thought of leaving her there would solve lots of things but it's not! I overlooked this one!\_

\_That man who came spying on her had never come again after that.\_

\_What if he knew she was there then already came for her?!\_

\_What if she's no longer there?!\_

\_What if-\_

His thought became exaggerated and it greatly overwhelmed him but he refused to think about it now, he can't think about it at the moment, although he know he'll be the one to pay the price if anything had happened to her; he shook his head hardly, gradually recovering himself to face the approaching creature behind the door. Then he turned to his back when he heard the stuttered step on his back, his discompose head starting to get the better if him, he had to acknowledge Ryunosuke's existence if he still wanted to meet him tomorrow, his hands were shaking as he hold to his extended sword as if that is the only thing anchoring him to the world, "If you lack the resolve to kill someone when you wield that, get out of here!" He harshly warned him before the door in front of him cracked, with a blink of an eyes, sending Shinpachi flying through the broken door.

"Shinpachi?!"

In the dark under the moonlight, the same pair of blazing eyes just like the one he saw on Toshimi few months ago came back into his view.

A monstrous human was crouching before him, eyes locked sharply to his, stimulating the goosebumps all over him. Yet, his spear laid extended to his front, pointing precisely to the fury's head.

"Be careful, Sano!" Saito who came up from one of the door of the compound appeared with an alarm face.

"He's no ordinary swordman!" This time, Souji exclaimed with his figure ruffled and messed, he was panting slightly from the sharp hit he received head-on on his chest, sent him flying thus smashing one of the shoji door inside the compound.

"GRRRRR!" The Fury growled, eeriness overwhelmed the air before he dashed straight to Sano.

\* \* \*

><p>"Hijikata-san, can I come in?" Sano queried from the outside of the door, unknowingly had stopped the lazy chat between Inoue-san and Hijikata inside of the room.<p>

"Harada, please come in." Hijikata answered, Sano opened the door, noticing there's someone else in the room, "Err did I interrupting?" He asked guiltily, while Inoue-san said it's okay because he was there to give the Vice-Commander his night tea, he then stood up and went to the door.

"Good night, Hijikata-san, Harada-san." He exited the room with the tray and slid closed the door.

"Sit down, Harada. Gen-san and I just talking about this letter when you came." Sano saw a letter on his table as he sat down, "it's from Toku, my sister." He resumed, knowing this is the first time he ever talk about his siblings other than Toshimi. He shifted his seat so he was facing Sano, the incident few hours before still slightly attached in his head but he wanted to talk about something else for now, although he don't have any clue about what Sano wanted to meet him for. If it is about their affair in Roshigumi, he wouldn't come alone like this, Shinpachi and Heisuke sure to tag along as well. Besides, he sensed something was troubling him due to the grim in his face.

He cleared his throat, sensing Hijikata's sharp eyes was scrutinizing his face, one brow arched quizzically.

He chose to start first, "Toku-san... you mean, the one Toshimi ran away from?" He still remember the incident that led to their first meeting in the dojo few months ago in the middle of the night.

Hijikata nodded and snorted amusedly, "She already find a man for her to get married with but she refused, saying it was still too young for to get marry, but when the marriage was already arranged, she ran away right when the ceremony about to begin and fled to search for me." He paused, "On that time Toku nee-san just get married but her age almost reached forty, so I can understand that she don't want the same thing to happen to Toshimi. And I thought I have fulfilled her wish but I forgot one thing..." He sighed, his remarks thwarted at the moment, he scratched his head awkwardly.



Sano was overwhelmed with anticipation when he's not resuming,  
"Forgot? About what?"

He forced a smile, "I think it's all my fault. Her letter this time was extremely long and mostly she was mad at me for letting Toshimi married without her consent and half of it because Toshimi never replied to her letter since she left home. Maybe she still afraid her sister's still plotting something for her but- uhhh... Women," He shook his head ruefully, "are so hard to understand."

A hearty laugh escaped him, partially because he knew where the letter ended up to after she read it; in the dustbin, but part of him somehow flooded with dread, it was following him and had escalated when they heard the explanation from Kodo Yukimura about the Ochimizu, the one Toshimi had mentioned before the day he met her all drenched with blood. He balled his fists.

Deep breath.

It's now. Or never.

"Hijikata-san, I have a favor to ask you.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Few days later<strong>

Rains were falling cats and dogs on the village, intensifying the gloominess that was looming on the starless night.

Hands on her chest, teeth clenched, breath was shallow while sweats had drenched the pillow under her head. After a long fight with the pain inside her chest, the pain finally gave her some mercy and she fell into slumber but not when the sudden strike of thunder and lightning woke her up.

The pain welcomed her back from her effortful sleep.

Her long black hair that lay sprawled on the pillow bleached.

Violet pupils darkened, replaced by scorching red lights.

She lied on her right side, hand clutchings on the pillow and on the futons, trying to shift some of her pain to the loyal lifeless object which accompanied her since her turmoil begin two months ago. Ripples of rainwater and heart-stopping thunders alternately took turn in decorating the stormy night, but she still can caught the sound of rushing feet stomping at the end of the hallway, she turned to face the closed shoji door when the sound gradually becoming louder and clearer. Eyes half-opened, hand glued to her chest, another one caressing her bulging stomach, silently hoping it wouldn't leave her anytime soon in a way it shouldn't, she silently prayed in each falling rains.

The door slid opened.

Sanosuke.

\*\*End of chapter 12\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Messy author's note: sorry to keep you waiting! I could have updated earlier because I have wrote the events for the chapter but then I decided to put it in the chapter 13th. So maybe it wouldn't take long for the next chapter to come up ;)<p>

Reviews guys!

### 13. During The Downpour

\*\*Let the enigma riddled, up until the base of your throat parted, then speak.\*\*

\*\*(The Asuka's seventh tenet )\*\*

\_Eyes widened, feet planted on the floor, body froze when the frightening sight greeted him.\_

\_There's a limp body ensanguined on the floor, the tatami-matted floor was stained with dark red fluid, the face was concealed by the long hair, he first thought that she could be dead but he noticed the shallow rise of breath from her.\_

\_The princess was laying limply on the floor, heavily wounded.\_

\_And there's a kunoichi standing two metres away from her, holding the only weapon that can kill an oni.\_

\_The forbidden sword.\_

\_Doujigiri Yasutsuna.\_

\_"What have you done?" His voice was low and constricted, but still managed to control the shock within, his eyes went to her, "Tell me what happened?!" Takatsugi's voice thundered, finally bursting the raging emotion inside him.\_

\_She casted him a side-way glance, eyes darkened, face unfathomable as she glanced to her Captain.\_

\_"Forgive me, Taichou."\_

\_With a few quick stride, she perched to him with godly speed before shoving the tip of the sword into his torso.\_

\_But she missed.\_

\_Instead, a strong arms gripped her neck viciously before he slammed her to the wall, choking her and forcing the air out of her lungs. The swords fall from her hand and rattled on the floor, producing a loud metal sound. Her hands frantically moved to the vice-like grip on her neck, wordlessly begging for air.\_

\_"What's gotten into you?! You're trying to kill me?!" He sounded like that of the thunder, that erupted right before the rain fall. He loosened the hold on her neck but not enough for her to wriggle away.\_

\_That was when the small square ceiling on their head was opened, revealing a man with a fair muscular build jumped down from the hole. The skillful feet absorbed the impact he produced as he landed on the floor. He wore the all black shinobi outfit from head to toes, the black garb on his chest displaying a white distinctive symbol, representing the ninja clan symbol from where they belonged to, the Asuka clan, the same as the one the Captain was wearing, his face covered with mask until the bridge of his nose, exposing the untamed piercing eyes to the view.\_

\_"Taichou, please leave at once. The guards are heading to the room. We'll settle things here." His voice didn't sound rushed but a hint of urgency conveyed as he spoke. Takatsugi's eyes never leave her as he spoke from behind him, neither he moved, but the pulse of his veins on his jaw was visible as he clenched his jaw in rage.\_

\_He let go of his deadly grip on her, she abruptly pulled away as she brushed the bruised on her neck. Then the Captain faced his teammates with fiery eyes, "Who gave you such order?!" He growled, eyes scanned the deaf faces, before it went to the motionless princess.\_

\_Someone gave them orders to kill the princess.\_

\_But who?\_

\_And why?\_

\_Let the enigma riddled, up until the base of your throat parted, then speak.\_

\_They kept their mouth silent, loyally obeyed to the Asuka's strict tenet, that is to keep the mission confidential until they become part of the earth.\_

\_Their attention shifted to the bloody princess, she was panting weakly, frantically searching for air for her dying lungs, her head lifted from the floor, her eyes searched them, before it locked dead to the masked shinobi and Hitomi, "I-I'll... wait for you... in hell... shinobi..."\_

\* \* \*

><p>She found herself in a crushing embrace, almost emptying the air from her as his hand cupped her head and the other circled on her waist protectively. He buried his face on her bleached hair, eyes closed, silently hoping it will change back to its original color once he open his eyes.<p>

He spoke none.

Neither she.

Just letting the fast heartbeat in their chest spoke for their stead.

She too, had her eyes closed, never want him to see her in this form, only to meet with a monstrous beast eyes and white snowy hair. His drenched white kataginu and his body was soaking her cloth, but she don't mind.

At the contrast, she even felt more comfortable with it.

Because the pain in her chest had ceased, finally, as though his presence had chased away the burning sting inside, allowing her to have some peace.

A moment passed, he braced himself to open his eyes, relieved above all, the black midnight hair had come back to life.

"Toshimi."

She didn't answer.

He called for her again. This time harder than before.

But there's still no answer.

\_Thump!\_

His heart was beating hard against his chest, almost bursting out of its place. Panic overwhelmed him. He turned slightly to her motionless figure on his chest, her wet hair glued to his shoulder and chest as she rested peacefully on his shoulder, her eyes closed, as though she was sleeping.

A sudden prick of pain stoked at the base of his throat, he swallowed the bitter gall back to its place. He cupped both her cheeks and brought it in front of his face, their forehead and nose touched.

"Don't disappear on me..."

He whispered again and again ever so slowly, hoping it would reach her where ever her soul is. He finally sighed in relief when she felt the soft breath from her, reignited the extinguished flame within him, unable to restrain the urge to kiss her, to lavish all the worries and anxiety in him on her ever since he left her couple of months back, he grazed his lips lightly against hers, slowly at first before it became insistent and harsh as the kiss deepened.

\_This is nowhere near enough.\_

She stirred slightly from her hard-to-gained slumber when she find it hard to breath and there was something hot probing in her mouth. Her eyes snapped open.

Sano was kissing her with enough ardor to leave her breathless, and helpless, the feeling she had not have in the past few months, naturally reviving the fast pulse of her heart back to action.

Impulsively, she pushed him away, yielding a chuckle from him. She automatically covered her swelled lips as the aftermath of such intense kiss with her hands.

He grinned, "You're awake. I thought I have to pursue to the sequel part to wake you up." He teased again, just to find the crimson on her cheeks intensified, with her shocked sleepy eyes still visible on her face. His previous restlessness had gone, replaced by the

peaceful expression, but then the grim took over the turn in sketching his face.

Eyes were heavied with unutterable emotion.

Toshimi raised her face to him, his gaze grazed her, feeling as if it was stripping down the resolve she built ever since her turmoil began. She don't want him to see this side of her. But all that was a second too late.

\_He saw me.\_

She saw the subtle questioning expression from his eyes, silently begging for an explanation. She can't run away from it. The fact that Sano is the first one to know she possessed such transformation still remain veiled to her.

Maybe the time has come. For him to know the truth.

\_Truth?\_

\_Tell him we're far too different from one another?\_

\_Tell him that I'm an oni?\_

\_Let him know that I can't carry his child even if I wanted to?\_

\_Maybe I can but how?\_

She can't bring herself to pick which one she could choose to face him, just to see his heart break in the end.

\_Let the enigma riddled, up until the base of your throat parted, then speak.\_

"Tell me, for Kami's sake, don't keep it in yourself," He tipped her chin upward, indirectly forcing her to convert all the complicated nerves inside her head to words. He saw she pressed her lips together, but still, she say nothing, sparking a lit of frustration in him.

He sighed, "Or are you still in pain somehow?" He paused, his amber eyes met her violet one, "You seemed you're about to break just now. Are you alright?"

To her shock, Sano didn't even asked why and how did she turned that way, "You.. you're not surprise?"

He huffed amusedly, almost secretively "I already know much much more than that."

Her brows knitted in confusion, "What are you talking about? I don't understand..."

The mark. It seemed it was closely related for what had happened to her tonight. Although he doubt this is the first time it happened while he wasn't on her side. He remembered closely the shape and the pattern of the mark when they were intimate. There were two vertical lines, each slanted slightly to the right side, one pointing to two

o'clock vector while the other opposing it; to the eight o'clock vector, both were connected in the center by two spirals, almost resembling a six and a nine, but in a more... archaic way, make it looked like it belong to an ancient yet magnificent organization or clan.

It was not an ordinary mark.

\_So where did she get that?\_

She touched his wet kataginu, "Sano, you're drenching-"

"Strip. I'll check the mark by myself."

"Huh?"

A hint of coerced sprung in his sudden stern voice, his hands went to the knot of her night garment on her waist. Panic deluged her. She quickly clamped her hands on him, stopping whatever attempt he was doing but to no avail, his hands persistently undoing the knot.

"Sano, what are you doing?! Stop it-" her hands engaged in a battle with his hands, but he easily grabbed her both wrists and held it away with his left hand.

"You didn't consume that Ochimizu, don't you?" His voice grew cold and impatient.

"Wh-what?"

"So why did you transformed? What \_make\_ you changed?" Finally he poured out his chaotic emotion, that have disturbed him since Hijikata-san said the one turning into a Fury was their first attempt of experimenting the so-called Water of Life. Although there might be a fraud in recording the result, there's no way someone had rubbed something on his back before he appeared a beast-like, like the way she was the very first night of their wedding when he discovered about it.

"Sano, please!" She tried to push him away but again, she failed. He was being forceful, the side he haven't show to anyone, the side she haven't seen on him-no, she didn't even want him to be like this.

His eyes never leave her now pale face.

One hand cupped her bulging stomach, "You're not going to tell me you're pregnant?"

She shivered, genuinely scared of him, being all imperious and cold, "Or about the mark on your back?" Even he himself can hear the streak pain in his thick voice in his ear.

She closed her eyes, trying to swallow the tears when she heard he whispered almost desperately, "Don't you trust me?"

The melody of the downpour was thickening, drowning them into the groundless turmoil.

His hands has stopped its progress and pulled away, watching his pregnant wife dropped her head so low her face concealed by her long hair, before he saw her hair was changing its color again.

And again, the previous fright and shock overwhelmed him.

"I trusted you." She lifted her head slowly, revealing the pair of blazing eyes he just saw few minutes ago before he entered the room, back into view. The pain in her chest came back, she tried to hold it in, but her twitching face that responded to the pain can't escape his gaze.

"Toshimi-"

She reached for his hand, feeling the pain lighten slightly although it was still there. She took his right hand, still covered in his usual red hand gear then placed it on her cheek, her hands were clinging to it, eyes shut closed, "I trusted you," she repeated, wanting him to know he had owned her everything, it's just her who didn't trust her own self. His own breath constricted, didn't believe his own eyes; her snowy hair darkened, back to its original state, as though his hand was the one changing them.

He felt the hold on his hand tightened, the swelled violet eyes lifted to him, the dam in her eyes was threatening to collapse, "So, can you stay with me until the baby is born?" Her voice almost broke into tears but muffled when he brought her again into his embrace. This time, it was her turn to drench him, but with tears.

He caressed her hair, feeling his own chest tightened as the moment passed. Then he whispered on her ear playfully, "I'm jealous, ya know." She lifted her head from his shoulder and took a mass of breath into her suffocated lungs then looked at his grinning face. She sniffed, "Jealous? To whom?"

He watched amusedly her reddened face before he placed his hands on her swollen womb, "To our baby, of course."

She blinked, "Why?"

"For he get to spend his time with you more than I am."

\*\*End of chapter 13\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Not-so-messy author's note: Phew! Finally! The most hardest chapter I have ever wrote has come to an end! Writing such an emotional conversation is not my forte I think. But I hope it came out okay nonetheless. By the way, I think apologizing to my readers has become a routine everytime I updated, so again, sorry for the wait! Please criticise or praise (?) me for my hard work, okay ;D<p>

Doujigiri Yasutsuna-the demon-slayer sword later used by Kazama in one of his encounter with Hijikata in the second season.

Bye!

## 14. After The Storm

\_Author's note: Dear readers, I believe I had allocated the time where the protagonist and Takatsugi were beheaded about a hundred years ago, right? So here I wanted to change it to maybe, two hundred years ago? I have to make it this way for some reason and you'll know later in the upcoming chapter. Sorry it's kind of late update but I actually still searching my new style of writing here and there. So you might find this chapter kind of different from the rest so I need your opinion whether it's better this way or not, okay?\_

\_Enjoy!\_

\_Disclaimer: No.\_

**\*\*In the night streets of Kyoto\*\***

From high above the land, on the top of the roof of the watching tower, a pair of eagle-eyes was scanning the deserted alley, scrutinizing every movements of the ronin samurai that scattered loosely throughout the province, some accompanied by oil lantern in their hands and some of them don't, probably feeling strong enough relying to their swords on the waists instead of a small lantern which offer an aid to the sight in the darkness.

They have received a threatening letter saying there would be no more ronin samurai in the province after the sun rises in the next few hours.

He had touched a nerves. LOTS of nerves.

And here they are. Preparing for an encounter with the man who was responsible behind the letter with just one intention; to wipe him out. This only proves how many of them had placed an illegal authority in some areas, flooding the province with a bunch of rowdy samurai, causing fear and fright among the townspeople.

Someone have to do something; to clear off the 'trash' and get rid of the smell, but the former comes first.

He lifted the black mask on his chin up to his nose, concealing only half of his face, making him part of the shadows from head to toes except for his upper face, even his dark-colored hair had tipped the odd to his favour, making him even less spotted in the misty night that resulted from the heavy rain few hours before.

The sharp eyes aimed on a samurai walking towards a woman, probably a townspeople, judging from the defensive stance she made upon seeing the sight of the man. She backed away, but he quickly grabbed her hand and pulled her to him. The woman was begging for her life, or her honor as a preserved woman when the samurai mercilessly trapping her in his arm with one hand tipping up her chin.

He jumped down from the roof, body lowered, reducing the force as he landed on one of the roof of the houses, absorbing any unnecessary sounds under his feet. He charged forward, jumping from one roof to another, seeping silently in the darkness of the night, until the targeted samurai was only few metres down under his nose.



Crack!

A sound of bone cracking filled the silent of the night, followed by a horrified gasp from the woman.

The samurai's neck was rotated 180° from its socket. The corpse fall down on his knees before the body touched the wet soil, then the back of his head had kissed the ground, the face, which exposed to the dark sky of the night was showing the tremendous shock for his soul being reaped off in barbaric way.

The woman cowered in extreme fear, face as white as ghost before she stumbled on her rear, slowly backing away, begging the mysterious black figure to spare her from taking her life.

But the man in the black outfit had somehow neglected her presence to something more profound.

He watched the lifeless man on the ground with his hands on his waist, as though checking on some dirt pestering on his feet, "Did I overdo it?"

Then he heard another dull thud on his back.

The woman had fainted.

"Oh crap..." He sighed, "I did overdo it."

"If that so," he sneaked silently to his next target few meters north just beside the small fishes stall, only to find he was holding something in his hand.

He's eating while waiting for the enemy to strike?

He was approaching him from behind without him noticing until he is just within his hand reach.

For some reason, the man felt cold, sensing an ominous chakra from behind him. But he dared not to move. He stopped munching the rice ball.

In instance, the black figure grabbed the hand holding the food then smacked it on his face.

One.

Mmf!

Two.

Mmnggh!

Three.

Mmngghff!

He drew his blade in one second.

"This is where the Asuka blade come to action."

The next instant it was buried in the enemy's heart from behind, sending him to the next world with a handful of onigiri in his hand.

\* \* \*

><p><em>"Stop doing that." she recoiled, her head evaded slightly from his persistent fingers, voice practically pleading, although actually she feel as though snuggling in a fluffy blanket on a drizzling crack of dawn when he do that.<em>

\_Caressing her hair. \_

\_He was bewitching her with his strong yet gentle fingers, deafly singing lullaby to her ear to sway her into deep slumber, bringing her back to the memory of her childhood where her mother used to spoil her everytime before \_\_she went to sleep.\_

\_The perks of being the last child.\_

\_Voluntarily offering his right forearm as a pillow, she can feel the weight of his head as he rested his chin on the top of her forehead.\_

\_He can't hide his grin to the fact he had discovered another secret of her that no other man know about but him.\_

\_Well, let's exclude Hijikata-san.\_

\_Fingers unrelentingly twirling between the silky black strands, "Why not? Afraid you can't sleep while I'm gone? That there's no one going to spoil you like this?" He wasn't seeking for answer rather he was enjoying himself of teasing her. Although he didn't see her face that probably was staring blindly on his chest, he knew she was listening.

\_

\_Emphatically, he added, "Besides, it's my prerogative."\_

\_Her eyelids were getting heavier, seemed fairly bewitched by his fingers but she forced her eyes to open as big as it allowed, she snorted heavily, tired of being assumed as a helpless little sister by her siblings, and now even Sano had joined the league. "I'm not a child anymore, you know. I can easily fell asleep without having you doing something like this.."\_

\_He huffed amusedly, "Really?" he paused, pleased at first before he suddenly swallowed the bitterness surfacing on his throat, knowing he will leave her in his place and set sail to Kyoto tomorrow.\_

\_"...hmm..." She's getting sleepier.\_

\_He tightened his hold around her and pressed her closer to the hard plane of his chest as he spoke, "I want to hold you like this forever." He whispered lowly, totally unconscious that the thought in his head had converted into words. "I want to hold you in a way to make sure you just can't be without me."\_

And he had succeeded.

After a relentless shifting on the futon, she finally fall asleep when he stroked her hair ever-so-tenderly with the familiar fingers.

His eyes couldn't stop blinking from time to time as he lied on the same futon as her. Watching the peaceful rise of breath from her is undoubtedly bless enough compared of him having countless of sleepless nights since he left her in Ishigaki. He's indeed was tired from his long journey from Kyoto to Ishigaki which took about a day and a half traveling by ship but he just couldn't find the will to sleep.

He had yet to hear all her explanation of what had happened tonight. And all of her chattering about her daily routine in the village, including the activities she had shared together with their baby. She sure have a LOT to tell him. And he too, have a LOT and a very important news he wanted to tell her. But that one can wait.

On top of it all, they have the rest of their life to sort all things out.

He closed his eyes, snuggling comfortably in his home; the woman named Toshimi Harada is his home. Now, and forever.

"You're so important to me," he whispered between his breaths, "So important I will give up everything to protect you," his fingers twined with her which rested on the underside of her bulging belly, "and our baby." He paused for emphasis, voice became extremely low and exceptionally hoarse when he murmured, "I don't want to lose you for the second time..."

\* \* \*

><p>"Ahhh.. Damn that Sano. I told him to bring me to the village's teahouse but he hasn't come out of his room yet? He got to be kidding me." Shinpachi ruffled his brown hair with his hand as he lean on the wall of the Harada's main room.<p>

Seishuu made a boring face. Including this time, it must have been the eighteenth time since his brother's friend whined. But he never have the heart to entertain his endless wailing.

"Sei-kun~~ Let's have a sakÃ© fight, if I win you'll hafta... (blahblahblah)"

\* \* \*

><p>Seishuu's POV<p>

\* \* \*

><p>I looked at him, at this drunk man. Why I'm the one to have to stuck with him of all people in th'house? Head lollin' back and forth like the candle flickerin' in the wind. Bah! What am I? A scholar now? Heh. Humor me. On second thought, I never knew Sano-nii have a friend like him. No. I mean ain't a swordsman supposed to be th'most composed man of all? No? Hmm.. Well actually I've never meet one too. It's just famous in that popular folktales. What was that? The Lady and Her Samurai? Oh man. I'm becomin' more and more like father these

days, reading an old folktales during fishing in the ship.<p>

"What are ya thinking, Sei-kun~~? Stop thinking so much or you'll become older than Sano and (blahblahblah...)"

I looked on him again then I shook my head. So pitiful, I thought. To him, and to myself too. I've always think someone like Sano-nii is just too awesome for bein' able to wield a weapon to save the day. Aww.. Come on. Teen's dream. But not anymore. Honestly, what's good in war? Why go troubling yourself with weapons, orders and all when you're free to do whatever you want? Hmm. Is that too simplistic...? However, let's picture the war like in the shogi board. All you hafta do is to protect the King and seize the opponent's using whatever pawns ya have, right? In other words, the pawns all were prepared to either be the defensive, offensive or the sacrificial pawn. Ah. I don't actually care what kind of positions do exist in war. It's just... What if suddenly the King sided with the opponents? What if... Wait, is that even possible? Hmm.. I'm thinking too much again. So this means, the earlier pawns that no longer have King would easily being wiped out by the enemy. Wait! So what's the meaning of their effort before this? Did they die in vain? So, whose exactly controlling all the movement? The King? Probably. I sighed. Well, it's not I that I care or whatsoever. But..maybe I should finish The Lady and Her Samurai to find the answer.

\* \* \*

><p>End of Seishuu's POV<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Seishuu rolled to his feet, still showing his boring face, "I'm goin' t'bed. Shinpachi-san, ya can use the room just next to mine t'sleep."<p>

He lifted his face from the sake cup, "Hmm? Ahlrite.. thangk-yoo-\*hiccup\* Sei-kun. I'll wait here..."

Seishuu sighed, "I don't think Sano-nii would be awake fer now, not when he finally met Toshi-nee after leavin' her fer so long, don'tcha think?" He said, finally able to ram something in his head that he have to wait until tomorrow to meet back Sano and Toshimi when he nodded and stand up.

"Yer right, Sei-kun." Shinpachi approached Seishuu then placed his hand on his shoulder, don't know whether it was the aftereffects of the strong sakã or whatnot, Shinpachi closed the distance between him and the tall young man before completely surrendering his weight on him; Shinpachi's arm wrapped around Seishuu's shoulder.

"Oi. What the-"

"You're sooooo... unbelievably... matured, Sei-kun..." He was so drunk he started to babble.

"Huh?"

"If Sano didn't tell me you're his younger bro," he paused for emphasis, "I would've thought yer older than him, ya know that?"

Seishuu flicked Shinpachi's forehead with his long fingers.

Pap!

"Ouch! What was that for?!" Sober took him over when the burning sting heightened.

Pap!

Seishuu had hit him twice.

"Yer sober now?" He smirked, the evil face he had been kept from the rest of the family members, except to his brothers, had appeared. He began to walk to his room with the now shocked sober man on his shoulder, "Follow me to the sea tomorrow."

"Huh? What for?"

"I'll teach ya the reality of life." Seishuu turned to him slightly with his once infamous evil face, the one that had made the blood in Shinpachi's face went dry, "In the sea."

\* \* \*

><p>Sano's POV<p>

\* \* \*

><p>What is this? I heard a laughter. No. A LOT of laughter, more than one. I open my eyes. Oh. I'm in my room. Then the door facing the yard was opened. A boy? Who is this? Wait! There's another one?! A twin?! Who exactly are they? Wait, is that...me and Sasuke? Am I dreaming? Both of them bear a red hair with...I can't see the color in the eyes because-HUK! Ah! I almost out of breath! Both of the boys jumped on my chest at the same time. Ah! You're killing me, kids! The boys are laughing heartily, not until I saw a...dimple? One of the boys has dimples on his both cheeks...?<p>

"Boys! Where are you?" Then I heard another voice. A woman's voice. A familiar voice. Toshimi? The boys jumped off my chest then quickly behave like good boys, sitting with that formal manner, facing each other. Wait? What is this? They're such a naughty boys. But...kind of cute though.

The door intersected with the hallway was opened. I looked at her. I don't even noticed I was smiling when I saw her. It's definitely Toshimi. But she looked kind of different though. Her face...I can see the unusual tenderness gracing her feature.

"Did you disturbed Father again?"

Father? Did she mean...me?

The boys simultaneously shook their head. One of the boy couldn't contain his laughter thus he closing his mouth with his small hand but I can still see the dimples on his cheeks. His laugh kind of sound like kikikikikiki.

She sighed then she huffed amusedly, exposing the dimples on her cheeks, exactly the same one like the boy. "Come here, you two. Go play outside at the yard, okay?"

"Emm!"

\* \* \*

><p>End of Sano's POV<p>

\* \* \*

><p><strong><strong>End of chapter 14<strong><strong>\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Please review of what do you think with this new style of mine. Is it okay with you guys? Or is it seemed a bit out of character? I hope not though. Anyway, reviews are mostly appreciated :)<p>

## 15. Would It Remain as A Tale?

"Idiot! Why did ya touch the crabs' pincers?!" Seishuu's outburst echoed throughout the yard, chasing away the birds on the trees branches. The regular sized pail in their hands fall to the ground, the moving crabs in the pail slightly jumped from the force exerted as it touched the ground.

Shinpachi held his freshly bruised forefinger between his fingers, his thick brows furrowed in pure pain and confusion of what had happen just in that few seconds. He threw his glare to the young man in front of him before he went straight to him with the devilish mask plastered on his frowned face.

The next instant, another strangle cry erupted, followed by a long, horrified one which causing her to flinch when she was about to take the neatly folded scrolls on the table in the main hall.

"Huh? What was that?" The additional weight on her womb had made her pressed the low table with her palms to get back on her feet before she took a peek at the opened shoji door facing the yard.

It was Seishuu who done the screaming. Her eyes glued to his jumping figure while holding his somewhat swelling fingers in his hand. Then he saw him took a small moving creature from the pail and shoved it hard to the man in front of him.

\_Who is that?\_

The man with the sculpted body that exposed slightly his chest from the faint blue jinbei on his torso took another small moving thing which later she recognize as crab and brought it to the one in Seishuu's hand. They were thrusting the extended pincers on the crabs to each other as to let themselves fight with the crab's pincers instead of exchanging fists in normal fight among men. Even the crabs were slashing its big pincers up and down in search for something to pinch between the big, red pincers. He shoved it to the man's face but he dodged. And now it was the man turn to counterattack. He dashed the crab pincers straight to his torso.

Another short yet eerie cry echoed.

She narrowed her eyes to slit, trying to recognize the man's hoarse voice. It was kind of familiar to her; that green bandanna around his head. She inhaled a sharp intake of breath when she finally recognized the man.

"Shinpachi?"

Both eyes reverted from the crab fight to the woman at the door peeking slightly from the room.

"Toshimi-chan!"

"Chan?" Seishuu's brows knitted in a mixture of disbelief and pain.

The excited man threw the crab back into the pail and ran straight to her.

"Toshimi, I was dying to see you! How are you?" His eyes crept to her own shock yet delightful face. She flashed him a wide toothy grin all the way before he arrived on the ground in front of her. She thought she will never meet them again once she settled there. Besides, Sano didn't tell her someone from the Shieikan dojo had come together with him from Kyoto.

She took a few steps to the hallway and lowered her body to sit on the wooden floor. "I'm fine. Did you arrive here last night? Are you the only one who came?" She took a peek to the right and left direction to check whether there's not only Shinpachi who followed Sano all the way from Kyoto, but she only found the flustered Seishuu who was busy struggling to pull out a crab pinching his dark maroon jinbei, ready to slice open the fabric. With a little help from the pillar on her side, she managed to settle down on her rear. One hand settled on her tummy while the other rested on her long black strands which she tied loosely and let loose on her right shoulder that lingered all the way down her waist.

Seeing her question left unanswered, she lifted her gaze to Shinpachi with a quizzical face but all she found was a dumbstruck swordsman.

"A-are you...Toshimi...for real?" He stuttered suddenly as his eyes glued to her exceptionally bright face which then brought a small giggle from her. As though something is pulling his eyes lower, his gaze shifted to her bulging tummy; eyes widened, speechless. At the first sight, he thought it was the Toshimi he had met few months before but he was wrong. She was changed. Those violet eyes that once belonged to a single, unmarried woman, they always shine so brightly almost everyday. But now it was different. It was more preserved, more livelier or to be precise, it was more...alluring?

"You're...pregnant?" He still unable to accept the appealing feature she now possessed and now she was pregnant? Or perhaps she was changed because she was about to become a mother?

Suddenly he was blushing.

Her face twitched in bafflement on his unspoken reaction. The sun although it's only ten at the morning, it was shining so bright she have to squint her eyes slightly when she looked up on his dazing face.

A voice suddenly sprang from behind her. "Toshimi-san, is there someone in yer room?" The voice stopped before he saw a man he haven't met before at the yard, "Eh? Seishuu, is that yer new friend?" Seimei Harada, the head of the Harada house suddenly appeared out of nowhere. He peeked again slightly on the direction of his daughter-in-law's room when he heard a sound coming from there then shifted to Shinpachi's face. The fact that his always-disappear-son had returned still remained veiled, the one who knew this is only his faithful brother, Seishuu.

She gasped. She thought his parents already know he had returned but considering the time he appeared last night it's not possible he had not meet them yet.

Another small voice echoed but it sounded like it was grunting, there's also another sound as though a heavy object being dragged on the floor, "Erghhhh...Ji-chann...let's caught squids...with this spear..." Naru was carrying the long marooned stick horizontally with her both hands, the sharp glinted blade pointing towards her grandfather an inch closer in each step.

Instead of showing a shock expression at the fact that Sano had come home, all thanks to the presence of the spear in Naru's hands, the old face remained composed but his eyes narrowed slightly.

At the same time, a conversation between Seishuu and Shinpachi had occurred.

He lifted the pail easily with both hands before purposely let it kissed Shinpachi's feet, although his stoic face showing otherwise. Shinpachi's earlier flushed face replaced by a streak of pain as though the Fuji Mountain had crashed his feet.

"Oh, sorry there."

"Grrr... Damn you, Sei!"

"Who told ya t' stand there? Besides," he approached Shinpachi's still reddened face with a demonic smirk, "Yer such a girl, aren'tcha? I'm blushin'..." Seishuu's muscular hands which had long used to lift heavy weight of boxes of shipments everyday were lifted on his chest, trying to mimic the reactions of the townsgirl when they stumbled upon him at the port and the expression he wore was that of a giggling girl with ridiculous sound came out from his mouth, begging for a smack from the Captain of the Second Division.

"What the hell!" He pushed away Seishuu's face away from him. His palm stucked on his face, much like the squid squelching his face when he stumbled one on the boat with Seishuu earlier.

He pushed his hand away with a clearly amused face, "Well, it's not that I care but yer look like a fool back then."

"You little-"



"What's wrong you two?" Toshimi suddenly interrupted their bantering, stopping Shinpachi's remarks.

Again, Shinpachi's face went red when he caught a glance of her. His body suddenly went spineless like the squid they met few hours before. With a frown, Seishuu caught the collar of his jinbei, "Oi. What's gotten into ya?" Shinpachi's head lolling back and forth like an unstable thin tree swaying by the wind.

At the moment, Toshimi's attention caught to Sano who had come out of the room with a plain silver-black yukata on his sturdy built down until it meet his ankles.

"Toshimi, you forgot this." He was holding a dark brown haori that belonged to Toshimi hanging on his hand.

"Welcome home, Sanosuke."

Sano flinched before he realize his father just few metres away in front of him.

The father took the spear from Naru's hand and hold it upright before he slam the floor with its end few times. It didn't that hard for him to hold the heavy long stick in his hand. Although he might seemed old in appearance but the built on his body which he hardly acquired during his teen had tipped the odd to his favour.

"You punk." His father hissed that managed to made them flinched as well. Sano just smile that best describe as a guilty smile, it had become more horrifying when he was holding his spear in his hand.

"Say 'I'm home' at least, you-" The blade of the spear in his hand pointed at him. His face was serious but they know he won't do such stupid things to his son.

But not to Sano.

He never thought the weapon he wield will someday pointed back to him. Although the scene was almost comical he suppose to laugh his heart out instead.

"I'm home, Father." He arched another innocent smile, rubbing the back of his head innocently while slowly lingering to his spear.

"Mmhh!" The father growled through his chest, denying him of his weapon and made him cowered slightly; a very rare sight to be seen on him at Roshigumi HQ.

"Ji-chan! Yer home!" Naru exclaimed gaily, although it's kind of few seconds late. Her raven eyes glinted fervently.

His attention shifted to his niece on his father's side, "Naru, it's you?" He wore a playful expression, "I thought yer a lady back then."

Back to Shinpachi and Seishuu:

"PFFTT! What a stupid thing t'say." Seishuu laughed at Sano's ridiculous remark.

It was admitted that the village girls once were mad over him, over his godly figure and face and his gentle smile that made them melt although it was in the freezing winter, added with his sometimes teasing coquettish line, even some of them had faint. But after he returned with a wife on his side six months ago, the Sanosuke fanclub had dismissed and switched the name to Seishuu.

And he pretty much dislike it.

Shinpachi nodded in response, as though mentally jotting down a note from Sano's action, "Is that how he fluttered the ladies?" It's way too early for Naru to accept that famous coquettish line from his uncle, so she was blinking her eyes, blurred. He muttered again under his breath, "I should try one later too. Who knows, I'll meet my other half in this island." The mad grin on his face was back.

After exchanging few talks with his father Sano finally had escaped his father's lecture but only with one condition; he had to let him use the spear for spearing fishes with his friend in the next village. With much of reluctance, he finally nodded to let his father use his weapon. Then his father left with a small quirk of satisfied smile on his face when he was about to turn back.

\_Well it's not that I'm going to use it again.\_

He later went straight to Toshimi who now was unrolling the scroll that belonged to Seishuu at the side of the table. Meanwhile, Naru made haste to the clack-clack sound that came from the pail at the yard.

"What is that?" The dark brown haori rested on his lap as he joined her at the low table. He thought he had seen it before but he didn't recall when and Toshimi seemed too engrossed in discovering the content of the scroll she didn't even bother to answer his question. Flustered, he moved closer to her, his hands positioned on either side of her hands on the table, face peeking from her left shoulder, casting a crimson shade on her cheeks when they heard someone 'EHEM' from the direction of the yard.

"You're too close, Sano." She whispered lowly, hoping he will let go of his trapping stance on her. Her intention to read the scroll was thwarted for the moment.

"Why not?" As soon as his eyes caught the title of the scroll, he promptly unrolling the scrolls back to its original condition. "You're going to read this when we're suppose to go on a date?" He replied with the same low tone as her but somehow she can sensed he was enjoying himself of watching her reaction.

\_Tch. I won't call it date though.\_

The dazed six years-old girl threw her eyes towards her blushing aunt, then to her teasing-eyes uncle, then back to the expressionless face on Seishuu and finally to the man she had met earlier whom she called ji-chan as well with an exceptionally annoyed face. She poked on Shinpachi's forearm, "Ji-chan, ya want t'know somethin'?"

Shinpachi who was sitting on the hallway back facing the couple turned to the girl, "It's nii-chan, Naru not ji-chan, ya know. Anyway, what is it?"

Naru made a smile which can best described as diabolic, made him wonder from whom did she inherited such expression. She speak, "Naru have seen more than this, ya know. They did a-"

Seishuu clamped down her mouth with his single hand before she even finish her sentence, but Naru somehow managed to evade his assault.

"They did a po-po!"

"Po-po?" Shinpachi exclaimed quizzically from the foreign word but not to Seishuu. He already know what this po-po means so he exhaled in relief, although slightly flustered on them for letting a child like her to watch such a scene.

"Kiss! Muah! Right 'ere!" She made a smooch sound before directing her finger to her perky little lips.

Their loud conversation had long overheard by Sano and Toshimi and she was blushing thousand shades of red thus covering her heated face with both hands. While Sano somehow was rather amused by it.

He moved away then took the haori on his lap and wrapped it around her shoulder. "Ready to go now, my sweet-dimpled wife?" They already had a plan of taking a walk to the village's center for Sano starting today had officially take over his father's position as the Village Chief.

Choosing to ignore his corny choice of words, she take off the haori wrapping her shoulder, "It's hot out there. I don't think I can wear this."

His brow lifted, "But," his voice suddenly gone low, "what if suddenly your..." then it trailed off.

"Your what?"

"Your..." He took the black strands on her shoulder into his hand, "what if you changed again?"

She made an acknowledged face and she can't hide her amused face, she replied then with also a low voice, "For your information, I'm only change in the night but never during the day."

"Really? But what if...you change this time?" He asked again, concern deluged him, "What if suddenly your eyes turned red? And what we're going to do if-"

"If I do change," she interjected him with a stern voice. "If my eyes gone red, then I'll just close my eyes and you'll be my sight then."

He seemed unsatisfied with her answer. "Then what if your hair turn white?" He hate it when he recalled the last night event and she can see the frown formed on his face. The sight somehow made her heart

tickled.

"Hmmm..." She pretended to think for an answer although she don't have one.

"Hmmm..." He mimicked her hmmm with the same expression as her, knowing he had won this time. For the third time, the haori exchanged in hands.

"If you don't want to wear it, I'll just carry this together in case something happen or if it raining in the afternoon."

She nodded plainly with a short hm before Sano helped her to get to her feet and went to the front door to fetch for the slippers.

\* \* \*

><p>"Hey, do you hear about last night?" Heisuke which now was lonely without his best two companions approached Souji and Saito which in the moment were about to switch their schedule for the night patrol. Souji turned his head to his direction with pure interest. "You mean about the rogue samurai have all been wiped off by that shinobi?"<p>

"Shinobi?" Heisuke asked. He never heard anything about the mystery man being a shinobi whatsoever. Even all the townspeople, namely the woman who had witnessed the presence of the man didn't remember anything except that he wore all black outfit with face half-covered.

"You didn't know, Heisuke-kun?" Souji paused for emphasis, building the anticipation in him and he was entertained much just by watching him. He turned to Saito standing on his back.

"Hajime-kun, you did hear about the townspeople saying they heard someone said 'Asuka blade' somewhere on last night, right?" Souji said but he already know Saito knew about it.

Saito nodded.

Heisuke's blue-green eyes shifted from Souji then to Saito, waiting for them to continue, but they didn't.

"So? What is this Asuka blade all about?" He inquired impatiently.

Then Souji cracked into humorous laughter, "I knew it Heisuke-kun didn't read old reading material. Have you read about that folklore...hmmm...what's the title again? The Samurai and Her Lady?"

"It's The Lady and Her Samurai." Saito corrected him plainly.

Souji shrugged his shoulder, "What different would that make? There's still a 'and' in the middle."

"And what's in the story that related to the last night event?" Heisuke now was showing a pure interest in the topic. At that moment, Kondo-san and Hijikata just came out from the Serizawa-san's room at the other side of the compound when they stumbled upon them.

"Ah. Kondo-san. Have you finish you're meeting?" Souji asked plainly before getting to the main topic. Kondo nodded, "What were you talking about just now?" He asked, suddenly his curiosity came out of nowhere.

"Hahaha. That's great, Kondo-san. Please have a seat. We need something to ask you." Souji invited the Commander to sit with them at the hallway and he did. Watching the Vice-Commander turned his back on them and began to enter his room, Kondo-san speaks, "Toshi, let's rest for a while. There's no need to rush about the matter before. Come and sit here with us."

Hijikata huffed, he was still mad about this unsettled Ochimizu things, and about how the Bakufu had made the Roshigumi as an experiment object. Added to his frustration, he was searching for the scroll that Toshimi acquired few months before where she claimed it has something to do with Ochimizu but he just didn't find it. He remembered bringing it together with him before they moved to Kyoto and he swear he saw it in his shelf just before Kodo Yukimura came few days after and brought that corrupted medicine. There's no way someone had stolen it because there's no sign of rummaging or his belongings being touched, except the stealer was a professional one. He wanted to read the content of the scroll and wanted to put an end to this but that is when Serizawa-san said 'A peasant is always a peasant. They never find how it was crucial to obey whatever orders they got from particular lord. That's why a peasant can never be a samurai.' If he don't hold any position in the Roshigumi, that old man had long met his soul reaper by his blade.

He sighed, another intake of oxygen had been wasted. He stared at them for a while before he spoke, "I'll go get us some tea."

Horrified, "It's alright, Hijikata-san. We might not need your tea after all." Souji replied, the last tea they had made by him was... leaving them speechless. It was outscaled, 11/ 10 of the worst tea they have ever drink.

"Shut up, Souji. I didn't say I'll do it myself, didn't I?" He growled. He knew he can't even prepare tea so he'll ask Gen-san to make for them. Saito quickly jumped from his seat and took the errand for bringing them tea instead. Hijikata and Saito switched place.

Turning back to the chat group, "So what is it you wanted to ask me?" Kondo-san asked again.

Souji started, "First of all, Kondo-san, you did hear about what had happened last night, didn't you?"

"Yes." He stopped for a while, "So you were talking about the Asuka shinobi? I have read about it couple of years back in Shieikan Hall." He replied as he crossed his arms over his chest, trying to remember the tales that not many people have read about.

"You do? Then tell us about it! And here I thought Okita-san know about this Asuka thing but it seem he don't know as well." Heisuke said, eyes watching him at the corner of his eyes.

"I was saying I do know about the story but never have the chance to read it. Perhaps it was with Kondo-san's all the years since I started in Shieikan Hall." He reasoned matter-of-factly.

Hijikata commented, "Hmph. You wouldn't even read it if Kondo-san give it to you anyway."

As if on cue, at that moment, there came Gen-san with a tray of teacups. He had prepared for Kondo and Hijikata who had just finished the meeting in the first place and it turned out he had made an extra batch for the fellow captains as well. After distributing it, each holding a cup of tea, finally having the right mood to chat and to take a short break.

"Please continue, Kondo-san." Saito, although wearing a stoic face he is, he was also couldn't help but to know about this rare folklore that only few people have read about compared to other famous ones such as The Bamboo Cutter and The Romance of The Three Kingdom just to name a few.

Then he started to tell the story;

"Long time ago, long before the men started to inhabit the land of the rising sun, there's already couples of ancient clans living in this fertile land. And they're not human, they're the one they called the children of The Moon, Oni. As in the title The Lady and Her Samurai, this is the true nature of the lady as the protagonist of the story. She was a princess of one of the strongest oni clan in the northwest of Japan." He stopped, watching amusedly the focus faces and they remain like that even after he stop.

"It seems I might have what it takes to be a storyteller when I retired." He grinned.

"Go on, Kondo-san. I'll make sure to come to your story session everyday when you retired soon." Souji agreed with the man who almost resembled his older brother.

He inhaled before resuming, "The princess has an attendant. A female attendant. It was said that she's an oni too. So this is where the Asuka ninja came to stage. She was a shinobi from a ninja clan called Asuka. The Asuka clan had long guarded the clan where the princess belonged to. They vowed to protect the oni bloodline with their lives."

"Ain't nothing special in the Asuka though." Heisuke cut in, only to be nudged by Souji by his elbow.

"Hmm... I don't pretty much remember the details of the Asuka ninja though. Sorry, Heisuke-kun. But I do remember the ending. It's kind of giving me goosebumps the first time I read it." Kondo-san said with a chilly face.

"Please don't spoil, Kondo-san." Souji commented with a pout.

"Yeah. Continue please." Heisuke since forever had urged him to continue.

"..." While Saito and Hijikata remained silent since the story started, no one could tell what was happening in their

head.

"Hahahahahahaha! I'm sorry, you guys. Actually," he suddenly lowered the octave of his voice by three. The fellow young captains followed his lead, approaching him by the ears to hear his next word.

"Actually, I don't quite remember the storyline."

"Ehhhhh~::~"

"But the ending was kind of...creepy I say. When I finished the story, I always turn to my back with this chill cold feeling crept up your neck. It was as though someone is watching you, you know. It's all because of the last line from one of the top rank of the Asuka ninja. Hmmm...what is it?" Kondo frowned, trying to remember the last word from the male shinobi while the rest stared intently to him.

In the progress of rummaging throughout the nerves inside his brain here and there, finally a tiny little nerve lit up.

"Ah! I remember now! Ahhh... I wish this tale will remain a tale though and not more than that." His voice gone low and the chilly expression on his face returned, unconsciously affected the atmosphere of the group as well. But they speak nothing as to let him continue the story.

He resumed, "The story begins..."

**\*\*End of chapter 15\*\***

## 16. Taka The BlackHawk

"Yo, Hokuto! Long time no see, mate!" Sano and Hokuto exchanged a big friendly hug when they stumbled upon each other on their way to the Village Center. Hokuto, who was Sano and Sasuke's childhood friend had replaced Sano's position for the past six months when he was away from the island. He was also a husband of Tohru, the one Toshimi had helped of delivering her child on the day Sano left the village after spending a week at the island. It's not only Tohru and Hokuto who went pale on that day when Tohru fell down the stairs in the bathroom, Toshimi had joined the 'pale club' as well because she never have the experience of being a midwife before. After holding the healthy baby boy in her hands, despite of being born prematurely, she quickly hand it over to the real midwife who arrived few minutes later at the place to clean the baby before brought it to the new mother. She remembered vividly her shaking hands when she gave the baby to the puzzled midwife when she was told the baby was already born. Remembering the flood of blood drenching Tohru's legs and on her waistdown yukata, she suddenly became afraid of the sight of blood for a great portion of few weeks after that.

"Darn ya, Sano! I thought I gonna spend th'rest of m'life goin' to this place everyday, ya know." He punched Sano's shoulder in friendly gesture before he dipped his head slightly to his friend's wife who had spent her time almost everyday with Tohru after her rough labor, and he was very thankful for that.

"Harada-san, please make sure to tie him up so he won't run away

again." He gave a face which a cop gives when they instruct the mother to properly take care of their children from being mischievous and ruining the public facilities again.

"I'm sure she already did. Right, Toshi?" Tohru who was holding her six months old baby, Haru on Hokuto's side, winking her brown eyes to Toshimi. She remembered when Toshimi came to their house to pay a visit when she was three months old pregnant, her mother-in-law, or Sano's mother had come to brought her back with an extremely worried face. Judging from that, she knew how deeply the old woman loved her, she was afraid something bad is happening to her when Toshimi stayed there until the sun was about to set. She'll only feel at ease when she was in the perimeter of her eyes or she will have Seishuu to accompany her when she wanted to go somewhere in the town. Probably the mother still haunted by the death of Naru's mother who died during her childbirth, leaving the girl to live alone without tasting a drop of mother's love.

And just how Toshimi had take care of her during and after her labor, she decided to do just the same to her.

She's her best of friend anyway.

Toshimi made an eager sound as soon as she saw Haru turned to look at her with his infamous chubby puzzled face. She was attempting to take him from Tohru's arm when Sano spoke gaily, "Wow. There's a mini Hokuto right 'ere." He snatched the baby from Toshimi's hold and brought him to his arms.

"Hey. I hold him first." She frowned in dissatisfaction.

"Hmm..." Sano weighing the baby in his arms, ignoring his wife's pleading, "How many kilos is he? He seemed very healthy-whoa look at these arms. He already have muscles!" The baby appeared to be very healthy that he was slightly bigger than any baby in his age, even the small arms tend to look like he have muscles due to his great health, and all thanks to the rich, incompetent breast milk.

The couple smiled in response, "Haru is about... almost 10 kilos-right dear? -the last time we brought him to the infirmary for checkup." Hokuto explained with a big proud grin on his face.

"10 kilos?" He startled for a moment before turning to flustered Toshimi as he whispered, "Toshimi, I don't think you can hold this boy. It was as if you're holding a bag of rice. Isn't it dangerous for the baby?" His golden eyes directed to her violet one, concern washed over his feature.

The frown in her face deepened, "Where did you hear such thing? I'm a doctor so I know well about this." Again, she tried to take the baby but, as if they were in relay race, the baby was passed to Haru's father before Toshimi even able to take him.

Hokuto chuckled when he saw the dead-serious expression on the young Village Chief's face then he whispered something inaudible to Tohru before she nodded with a small smile and took back Haru in her arms.

"Excuse us, ladies. We've got some business t'attend to. Let's go, Sano." Hokuto invited him into the small house which they used as a



center for a meeting and for other occasions related to the village's well-being.

"Go on ahead. I'll walk in later." He replied shortly with his still stern face.

"Don't worry, Harada-san. I'll be with Toshi once yer inside." As if she understand what is going on in Sano's head, she offered to be with Toshimi when the husbands disappeared into the house.

He caught a glimpse of sadness on her face as she bit her lower lips, as though she was trying to hide her feelings under those fragile poker face. Suddenly guilty overwhelmed him.

Sensing the couple needed some time alone, Tohru left them and went to the bench at the front of the dango shop few meters away from the Village Center.

He approached her and let her sit on the vacant bench in front of the small building and he knelt in front of her. Even before he settled on his knees, he saw a drop of water kissed the ground just above his right knee. He looked up.

A tears running down her cheek.

Finally, the fragile wall collapsed.

"Toshimi," He reached up and brushed away the tears staining her face with his thumb, "I'm sorry I made you angry." His husky and deep voice was heavied with regret.

She quickly shook her head in denial, "No I'm not angry..." She couldn't complete her sentence as she felt her chest constricted with heavy emotions.

He gazed on her reddened face, brushing another tears smearing down her cheek as he asked softly, "Then why are you crying?"

A hiccup escaped her lips, "I.. It's been too long...since I hold Haru..."

His gaze soften, "So you were sad I didn't let you to?"

She shook her head again, "No..." She inhaled deeply, trying to regain the air to her lungs. This is the second time she ever cried in front of him and she doubt this will be the last, but this time, definitely, was all the abnormalities of her hormones doing.

"I don't know... I'm not usually like this..." She wiped her wet face with the back of her hand, winning a small chuckle from him.

"I know." His hands relaxing on either side of her thighs on the bench before they went to her hands rested on her lap. He stared on her fingers before caressing them lovingly with her strong hands and brought it to his lips as he kissed each knuckles, lavishing every drops of unspoken love under those wordless gesture to the queen of his heart. To the one he vowed to protect. To the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. And more importantly, to the one he vowed to love with every inch of his heart.

All the while, she was mesmerized by his simple yet lovingly gesture that made her heart skipped a beat. She felt as if... she fell in love again, with the same man. Twice.

Thank goodness that not many people were there at the streets at the moment or else she would rather die in the sea of tears.

He never lifted his face to her, eyes glued to her slender wrists, "Toshimi, my love..."

His words were burning her from inside.

He grabbed her hands in his own and never stop caressing them, "I can't forgive myself if you got hurt. Or our twin babies."

His words had held her captive.

"T-twin?" She still don't have the chance to tell him that, although it was only his mother's prediction, and she had waited eagerly for that time to come but... He already know about it?

He huffed amusedly on her shocked expression, "How can I go and leave you all alone here when there were sooo much \_unsettled\_ things between us?" He stood on his feet before he helped her to get to her feet too and somehow, these little things about her; having his babies in her womb, tears came out without a moment's notice, helping her to support herself with the additional weight on her body, having trouble sleeping in night except when he was there to caress her hair, these things about her had made her more attractive in his eyes and undeniably, had made him the happiest man on earth. How could he ask for more from the Kami when he felt he had owned everything he ever wished for?

A wife to be loved.

Children to take care of.

A family to protect.

Friends to back up whenever they needed.

A village to be managed until the day his hair grow white.

He turned to his puzzled-looking wife as she stared quizzically on him. He couldn't help but to admit he had made the right choice of being a husband to her, the one who can protect her and he'll be there by her side through thick and thin for the rest of their lives.

He took her hand in his and twined her fingers with his strong ones. "You can still walk, right? Let's go somewhere quieter. Perhaps to the-"

"Eh, didn't you have meeting in there?" Her forefinger pointed to the building behind her.

Sano shrugged his shoulder matter-of-factly, "Why not? I'm the Village Chief anyway. I can earn myself a day break whenever I wanted." She saw a small gentle smile touched the corner of his lips, slowly brightening his handsome face, making her smile too at the

end.

They really don't say 'smile is contagious' for nothing, aren't they?

\* \* \*

><p>In the Satsuma-han manor,<p>

There had been a ruckus going on about the last night event. All the high ranks of the Satsuma-han had gathered for the routine mission held every Tuesday morning and it happened there's quite an interesting topic to talk about last night. Every week, there must be a mission or couple of missions assigned to particular capable members to spread and strengthen their influence in Kyoto from the inside, such as providing the most important things in the era where war is almost inevitable, that is money, or what they called as the Lord's War Chest. Such mission was held as to win the favor of the lords to their side. Just like they said, the people of Satsuma-han is the politics for the politics of people of Kyoto.

A pair of raven eyes was scanning the room, eyes scrutinizing each faces, each movements, each words, and each glances of eyes. The average size room was filled with male scents before another notable scent detected.

A scent of tobacco had diffused into the molecules of the room.

Kazama Chikage.

The man he was waiting for had finally appeared. On his side, there's a big guy with dark red clothes under the black haori where white snakes design crawled up his shoulders. He wore the face of a preserved man, burying his emotions under those emotionless mask, before Shiranui appeared at the doorfront.

He stood at the door for a while after Kazama and Amagiri had entered, attracting attentions from the people of the Satsuma-han to the door. The wild untamed purple eyes of his scanning each faces before it stopped at the end of the row of the last line of the people of the Satsuma-han. After catching a glimpse of him, he made another round of inspecting each faces before he made a grunt sound, satisfied.

"Sorry, folks. Just want to make sure everyone is here at the moment. We can't afford having someone come into the room after Kazama-dono, isn't it?" Somehow his words sent shivers down their spine, remembering how last week the late member that came after Kazama was sent to the next world with a peculiar weapon in Shiranui's possession just in a second. Their eyes glued to the black long guns strapped on his waist before each swallowing the nervousness down their throat.

"Please move on."

He made his way to his favorite spot, at the back of the room, leaning his back on the wall while Kazama and Amagiri at the seats prepared for them at the middle of the room.

But not this time.

The room, which located at the first floor of the building, provided quite a view although during the day where the hustle and bustle of the street occupying the sight. Kazama went to the window of the room and sat on it with a leisure manner, his half rear settled on the veranda, left knee bent while the other feet rested on the tatami-matted floor.

Again, the tobacco scent intensified as the blond-haired oni lighten his pipes, inhaled it for a second before he blew it at the open window.

Feeling slightly intimidated on the presence of the three men which unknowingly were summoned every time they held a meeting, they keep a composed manner before continuing the meeting with the usual topics about their last missions.

The crimson eyes attached to a merchant selling his goods on the streets when he spoke, "Somehow, I can sense a hawk somewhere near here."

The meeting stopped.

The earlier distraction came again yet stronger than before, hearing the low, deep voice of the one they called, Kazama-dono.

"Or probably right here. In the room." He added matter-of-factly.

The owner of the raven eyes smirked under his façade puzzled mask.

After a moment whispering among them, Amagiri gave them the signal to move on with a slight bow as a apologizing gesture for interrupting the meeting.

Shiranui who was seating just three metres away from Kazama couldn't hide his amusing smirk as well.

"So I see," Kazama spoke again, blowing another smoke of tobacco as he directed his remarks to Shiranui, "The folktale appeared to be true after all. He is everywhere."

Shiranui neither nodded nor shook his head in denial, only a small smirk lingering on his face.

The Vice-Head of the Satsuma-han cleared his throat before he resumed to speak, "So you see, a lot of people have amassed a hard feelings against the Roshigumi these days. Although the Lord of Aizu had favoured them and bequeathed them the power to guard the province, but the townspeople still unable to accept the accursed Wolves of Mibu."

Some of them nodded, showing an acknowledged face and hatred when they heard the word Roshigumi.

A devilish smirk plastered on the old man's face, "So this is where we come in." With that, he started to state the plan of deepen the hate of people towards Roshigumi by using their name to forcefully

borrow a large amount of money from several shops, thus creating a larger gap between the people and Roshigumi.

After the meeting ended,

The faithful men of the Satsuma-han which vowed to strengthen the forces of their clan began to dismiss, except the man who bear a disguise as a man of the faction with bald head, pert nose and lifeless eyes stood at the middle of the room, right until Shiranui volunteered himself to close the door of the room, leaving only four of them in the room at the moment.

Kazama shifted his crimson eyes to the man clad in worn out faint blue yukata with a faded grey hakama. With an instant, the disguise disappeared in a grey smoke before the real him appeared in a more common dress, a black jinbei with the same color of hakama on his waist down. Only this time there was a round straw-hat on his head, a hat that most traveler used during their travel from one place to another.

Finally, his crimson eyes met the raven one. Kazama grunted, seeing the dangerous stagnant aura looming over him, especially in those dark pupils, as if it was really resembling the predatory name he bare.

Takatsugi.

"Taka. I knew it you'll come today." Takatsugi or to be short, Taka which means hawk was standing right in front of him, defenseless, where if something unintended bound to happen, he'll surely be wiped off in a split second when forced to face the three powerful oni and him on his own.

Or maybe not.

He also was not an ordinary man who only bare the blood of oni throughout his veins.

He's a ninja. A part of the \_fictitious \_but well-known Asuka ninja. Or more precisely, he's the one who made the Asuka well-known through his last speech before his life ended under the blade of Yukimura. It had spreaded throughout Japan only by a piece of scroll, written at the top of it as 'The Last Collection of Japanese Folktales', highlighting it as one of the most rare tales people had known about.

Even under those dangerous mask, he quirked a greeting smile, finally, had met face-to-face with the only man that had defended them from being dragged to the death stage but to no avail; Japan wasn't his land, although already possessed a bond tying him with Yukimura-han when the princess still alive, but he no longer shared one. His precious fianc e was dead. Even the royal family of the Yukimura-han had started to amass quite a suspicions towards him for strongly defending the culprit who they believed had killed his own future wife.

He had something, something that no one know about except him.

And as for Taka, as the one who bear the title as the Captain of the team to guard the palace of Yukimura, he knew something's not right

was happening when he saw his best spy, the one who was assigned to escort and to guard the princess where ever she went, Hitomi, could went so overboard as to do a mission without consulting him. And that included his right-hand man, Saizo who also appeared at the scene when the princess was on the verge of death.

Even so, whatever it is, it's all in the past. There's nothing he can do to change it. Their still uncovered mystery, or the one they called 'history' had long written by a hand, converting the ill-fated ending of the Asuka ninja into the unmoved, lifeless characters before it passed down from generation to generation. Eventually, the relentless flow of time had made the past as though it never exist before, only the melody of their memories being played on the tongues of the elders before the other tales overtook them.

"Kazama, it's a pleasure to meet you." He said with a small grin on his face.

Kazama snorted amusedly, returned to savour the musky tobacco scent as he inhaled, releasing a small cloudy air through his nose, "I've heard about you," he paused, looking back at the people on the busy street, "you've earned yourself quite a name for last night. So it makes me wonder," he stopped again for emphasis, "Are you really going to let the Aizu to use you?" Based to the fact he had included himself as one of Aizu's high official, it was not hard to conclude that he was one of them. Perhaps.

"Use me?" Taka huffed before he answered, "Unfortunately, it's the contrary. You know I don't serve any particular lords-" his words were cut mid-air as Amagiri interjected him.

"You shinobi may pretend to serve all the lords, daimyo, including any head of clans to see how the tide of the upcoming war will blow."

"Right, right." He waved his hands in dismissal as to waved off Amagiri's lecture about him but he just won't stop.

"Your loyalties are on your mission and not to any particular lords. They put themselves on their fight for survival. At one time, that is the true nature of a ninja." He ended.

"Pretty dirty, I'd say." The kind Shiranui added the rest smugly.

Taka hmphed, "Look who's one to talk." He threw a nasty glare at Shiranui at the corner of his eyes.

"So tell me, Taka, why are you here?" Kazama stood, straightening his black haori, "Don't tell me you want me to use you."

"Exactly." He replied almost happy-naturedly. "Considering I'm kind of free these days," he talked as if inviting someone over to his place, " Perhaps I can help you to find a suitable bride if you want."

Kazama narrowed his eyes at the mention of the word bride. He turned to Shiranui, only to find him whistling something unrhythmic.

The head of the Kazama clan grunted, "Very well. Do as you like.

Although I'm not that confident you'll find one female oni on this place."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Taka inquired quizzically.

"What do you mean 'what do you mean'? Don't you know female oni are rare to find these days?" Kazama spoke as though arranging some business of finding gold with an inexperienced worker.

Furrow on Taka's face deepened, "That's why I'm saying 'what do you mean'. What do you mean by rare?" He drew a small paper from his jinbei before he shoved it to the blond-haired oni that stood few metres away from him. He saw a long list of names on the paper before Taka pulled it back.

"You know I won't come here unprepared, so this is a list of female oni throughout Japan. And I won't say it rare though." He drew out another paper from his jinbei, "Here's the second list." He showed again the paper to the now flustered oni when a sudden thought hit him, "Ahh... You haven't met even one, aren't you, Kazama? It's alright. I won't tell anyone."

It was so hilarious Shiranui couldn't contain his laugh while Kazama's face was crimson red with rage, "Don't push your luck, shinobi. You do want something in return, don't you?"

Taka's face brighten, "Of course. It's important to have a mutual agreements and benefits on both sides, right?"

"Then say it." Kazama said tersely.

Taka watched each faces in the room for a moment before he spoke, "Before that, let me clear off one thing. The next time we meet, probably I won't be there. My men will take care of it."

"Your men?" Amagiri asked.

Taka nodded as he resumed, "Just like what happened last night. It wasn't me."

\* \* \*

><p>"So you're saying...you're an oni?" Sano asked very carefully her last confession. And she also became extra careful as she nodded, watching intently his next response.<p>

"You mean...oni... a demon?" He asked again, his left brow arched, disbelief.

She fidgeted, "...Kinda.."

"You mean...like this?" He made a clawing sign with both his hands with a small sound of arghhh, his teeth clenched. Seeing the... cute act from him, she muffled her laugh with her hands as she shook her head.

"Nope. It's like this." She placed her extended forefingers to each side of her temple, imitating a creature that was complemented with horns.

"Psstt.."

"What are they doin' actin' like that?"

"Who knows..."

"Hey, isn't that...Sanosuke-kun?"

"See? I told ya he's back..."

Toshimi instantly hit him on his forearm, "This place is not quiet at all." She peeked on her surroundings only to saw several people were watching them at great perimeter as to overheard them. Sitting on the big rock few meters away from the beach, complemented with few numbers of trees offering as shelter, the place might be one of the best spot in the village.

Horrified, "Sano, what if they heard me?"

With an amused huff, he tweaked her nose lightly, "If they heard you, they possibly think you as..." He spin his fingers beside his head, showing how exactly the villagers will look at her after this; a mad woman. She gasped sharply, "Then you too-"

"But not me."

Feeling like being played, she narrowed her eyes, gazing at his grinning face intently, as though the smile he held had a hidden meaning underneath it, "You don't believe me, don't you?"

"Didn't I tell you to trust in me? That goes two-way around, ya know. Besides," he paused, closing the gap between them as he whispered on her ear, "Do you have this...horns?"

Following his leads, she also whispered lowly, to make sure that only him can hear her voice, "Horns...I...have...b'cause-"

"Eh? Did you say something?" Sano pulled away. "I thought you were blowing air into my ear."

Her eyes twitched in frustration when she saw his face as though was begging for a slap, and she would glad to give one but...she couldn't. She sighed, then she said in normal octave, " No, I don't have one alright."

Shocked, "You don't? Why?"

"What? Do you want me to have one?"

"Hahahaha!" Watching her pouted tickled him, "So why you don't have one?"

She returned to cut down the octave of her voice by three, "Actually, I'm a half-blood oni. That's why I don't have horns."

"Half-blood?" He stopped, something was rummaging throughout his nerves in his head. He remained like that for few seconds, holding her in bafflement when he speak none.

"I really wish you have one though." He muttered underneath his



breath.

"What? I can't hear you." She inquired when his earlier remarks failed to reach her.

He arched a smile, his hands reached hers on her laps, "It doesn't matter anyway. As long as you're with me, you'll be safe. So just stay by me."

**\*\*End of chapter 16\*\***

**\*\*Author's note: Hmmm there's nothing much to say except...please review :'( I am sulking right now but I'm not like some author who goes 'Give me 100 reviews or I won't update' you know. But I'll go 'No review, story deleted!' MUAHAHAHAHA. K. Joking.**  
**\*\***

**\*\*\*sigh\*\*\***

**\*\*No I won't say bye anymore.\*\***

**\*\*\*walk away\*\*\***

**\*\*The sakura in the Tale of The Fallen Sakura had withered.\*\***

**\*\*\*sigh\*\*\***

**\*\*Oh before I forgot. If any of you had read my other story (I Can See Him Through Her) please say HURRAY because I'll update that one more regularly after this.\*\***

**\*\*Ja-ne, minna!\*\***

## 17. The Price of Fame

\_"Both of you, hurry up and leave this place. Let me take care of this." Taka spoke, back facing the two shinobi, his eyes locked to the lifeless princess on the floor.\_

\_"Taichou, but that's-" Saizo, the masked shinobi spoke, only to get interjected.\_

\_"It's an order."\_

\_"His eyes glued to his Captain's back, the broad back which had chose to shoulder their crime, judging from the infinite tone of his stern voice, indirectly manifesting the hidden message that had come along with it.\_

\_"It was his last order.\_

\_"Saizo nodded firmly. He can hear the footsteps of guards rushing to the place. With one swift jump, he was up in the attic, once again, before he extended his hand to Hitomi.\_

\_"Hitomi, take my hand." Although the voice was layered by a piece of black mask, she can hear the hint of urgency as he spoke. She looked up, her eyes locked to him, she wanted to reach his hand just like he

instructed too.\_

\_But she can't move. Her hands denying what had commanded by her brain.\_

\_"There's no time, Hitomi. Hurry up and take your man's hand."\_

\_Her eyes widened in surprise.\_

\_'Taichou knew about us?'\_

\_"Come on!" For the first time she ever heard him practically exclaimed, finally electrocuting the nerves in her hand as she tried to reach for him.\_

\_The door flung open.\_

\_"Seize them!"\_

\* \* \*

><p>-Saizo.<p>

-Yes, Taichou.

-You're certainly my second self. Good job on last night.

-I'm just fulfilling my duty-wait, are you praising yourself?

-Hahaha. You caught me. By the way, how's your trip?

-Great. Never been better.

-Glad to hear that. In any case, watch your back. I presumed we have attracted many unwanted eyes from beyond the shadow. Don't get your throat slit in your sleep, Saizo.

-...Roger that.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>In a dark alley in a small district of Kyoto.<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>A man with maroon kimono was standing with pure restlessness under the drizzling dark sky.<p>

Kodo Yukimura.

He turned his eyes to his right, then to his left, his patient was growing thin when the man he was waiting for since twenty minutes ago still hasn't arrived yet.

The moment which seemed like infinity, he caught the sound of the small ripple from the newly formed puddle on the ground on his back, splashing the water to the even surface of the alley.

He turned to his back.

"You're late." Before him, there stood a man which seemed as though he was part of the night. He had to blink his eyes couple of times before he finally realized he was there.

Without a second to waste, the man spoke, "Say it." His voice was rough, as rough as his face; he is a man with a single eye, his only sight left was on his right where the other was torn away from him in a bloody fight with one of Asuka's elites long ago, Saizo.

He knew the man in front of him is a man with a few words, which actions speaks him better. That's why he asked him to manifest what's in the letter in his hand to come into reality.

He's the perfect man when it comes to avenging the Asuka shinobi.

He gave him the letter.

Promptly, he unfold the paper and read the line which only consist of three words, although there wasn't much lighting, the moonlight had assist him in revealing the words.

\_Execute the Asuka shinobi.\_

A bloodcurdling smile arched on his demonic face. He only took about three seconds before he asked him, "Any request which one first?"

A sly smile lined on Kodo's face, "Hitomi. Hitomi The Alchemist."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Few days later<strong>

"Sei, could ya pass that?" Sano asked Seishuu for the smoked squid on the tray across the table, then a second later it have arrived on his hand. At the corner of her eyes, she was following the direction of the small plate from across the table until it reached just in front of her. If things goes differently; if the mother wasn't here, she had long finished all the squids by herself.

No. Sano is here too.

Sano noticed Toshimi had stopped munching and saw her eyes fixed on his hand. His eyes followed to her direction.

Squid.

He quickly took one and passed back the small plate to Seishuu and in a blink of an eye, as though that was the last population of squids on earth, the squid had disappeared into his mouth. Then he heard she sighed lightly, stuffing a mouthful of rice and munched it half-heartedly. He take a look to her plate, she only had the same dishes everyday; miso soup, veggies, rice of course and a half-cooked egg. With some ketchup.

Not even a smoked fish.

\_"Toshimi. Why did your cheeks gone red?" He touched her cheeks with the tip of his fingers, feeling the skin had become slightly rougher than usual. She took turn in rubbing her cheeks but slightly rougher.

Because it was itching.\_

\_"It is? Erghh.. It was itching too." She rubbed it again with the back of her hand.\_

\_He crossed his arms over his chest, thinking, "Hm? What could have cause that? Or is it normal when you're pregnant?"\_

\_She shook her head, "I don't know..." Still rubbing her cheeks before it went downward to her neck, slowly small red spots starting to surface.\_

\_"Hmm..." He watched her cheeks and neck had gone redder and redder although she had stopped rubbing them. "I better ask Mother for-"\_

\_His movement thwarted as he heard a gasp before his sleeve being pulled back to his seat. Her head dropped, hand still clenched to his sleeve, "Don't...tell Mother..."\_

\_He frowned, "Why not? Maybe Mother would know about this."\_

\_"She...she already know about this..." She began to rub again her right cheek.\_

\_"What?"\_

\_He lifted his face to him, showing him the saddest face she ever possessed, "I... I have an allergic towards seafood." He was startled enough, that much she can tell from that widened eyes and mouth half opened. She already prepared for this when yesterday they stepped into the seafood shop near the port and it was actually her request too.\_

She have this allergic towards seafood yet she wanted to eat it so badly. He can see why she wanted to. Well just look at her plate. And those boring face.

Shinpachi noticed something's wrong in Sano when he keep on glancing to Toshimi who sat on his side, picking a small piece of half-cooked egg added with some ketchup and mixed it in her rice before stuffing it again into her uneager mouth. Despite of the merriness of the air where Seishuu was bragging about the big lobster he caught down the river yesterday to his Father, where Naru keep on showing him her collection of cicada shells she hid under the low table, but the couple seemed...isolated from the others. They didn't talk to each other, making him wonder if they were fighting somehow but then he saw Sano said something to her, probably was trying to cheer her up, judging from the bright expression he wore, but she shook her head with the same characterless face like before.

The mother, probably had noticed her daughter-in-law's sad face, she asked, "Toshimi, yer alright?" Instinctively, as though her voice was the only sound echoed in the room, all attentions suddenly shifted to Toshimi.

"Em?" She looked at the gentle mother's direction before she realized every eyes were focusing on her. Slightly confused, "Err.. I'm okay."

The mother let out a chuckle, "Sanosuke."

"Yes?" He stopped eating when she called for him.

"If ya don't want yer child t'drool all over day an' night," she stopped, putting down her chopsticks, "ya better ask 'er what she's cravin' for."

Sano and Shinpachi choked out of sudden.

"Wait, why are you reactin' too?" Seishuu said, referring to Shinpachi.

Toshimi was dazed off, she didn't even know she was craving and all of this finally had make sense. Except for the fact she was craving for something she can't eat. Suddenly her face glinted brightly, "Sano-"

"Later. In the room."

She pouted.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Half an hour later<strong>

"I'm leaving." He stood in front of the front door of the huge resident of Harada, clad in black jinbei from head to toes, an usual dress for men in the village when working at the sea.

She nodded and arched the brightest smile for her husband, "Good luck in the sea. And... good luck in finding it."

He raised his curled fist to his chest, face as determined as his strong fist, "I will find it for you. Just wait for me."

She nodded again then made the same fighting expression as him with her hand balled into fist, "I'll be waiting. Be safe." He watched her for a heartbeat before he approached her with a few quick stride and placed a chaste kiss on one of his favorite spot on her face; the corner of her eyes.

The smile on her face only getting wider with her eyes closed when his kiss lingered to her left eye. His hands crawled to her tummy, circling the perfect roundness she possessed. He whispered on her ear, "Seeing you like this...made me want to hold you all day today. In the room."

A fair blush tainted her cheeks, "Wha-get your mind straight already!" A small laugh escaped him when she flattened her hands on his chest and pushed him away.

Then a figure with a navy blue jinbei appeared from the direction of the yard, "Sano! Let's go!" Shinpachi slung his hand over his shoulder, before realizing Toshimi was standing right in front of him at the front door.

"Oh! Toshimi! Don't worry! I'll get it for ya!" His azure eyes was burning in conviction; to search whatever thing she want, be it the

blue whale or the legendary Kraken, he'll find it to the world's end.

He wanted to avenge Sano for he had ridiculed him the other day.

"I've got a fish!" Shinpachi fervently exclaimed with the fishing pole in his hand, nearly turning the boat upside down when he suddenly stand up.\_

\_Sano grimaced but he muffled his laugh, "What is that? Your first anchovies? Well done."\_

Sano threw him a nasty look, "Tch. Do you even know what she want?"

"Then tell me!"

"Why should I? She's \_my\_ wife, \_my\_ responsibility." Sano reasoned concretely, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Hmph. Doesn't matter. I'll just have to watch what were you doing all day then I'll do the same and give it to her. Aww. C'mon, Sano! It's my last day here anyway. Cut me some slack will you?" He practically pleading when Sano brushed him off and started to walk towards the main gate.

She watched both man walked with their usual big stride before their view was swallowed behind the gate. A feverant smile sketched over her face, "Yosh! Since he got a work to do on the sea, I got mine too." Slowly but surely, she made her way to the room which they shared together with a rather slow pace. Recently, the weight in her tummy was getting heavier as now her pregnancy had reached sixth months and half and she know it will get bigger and much heavier as the months passed. She couldn't help but to get nervous when a woman from the neighborhood had thought she was in her late eighth months, judging from the unusual size of womb she possessed.

Maybe Sano's mother's prediction of her having a twin in her womb is true after all.

Speaking of which, she still can't believe, she still couldn't fathom why did Taka-Sano's brother or Sano's twin pretended to be dead just to return to the old life he once possessed. Wait. Before that, she didn't even thought or could tell that, of all people on earth, why \_he\_ is Sano's twin? Is this a fate? Or a coincidence? No. She didn't believe in coincidence. Everything happened for a reason. Although she have yet to discover about that.

Once in the room, she quietly shut close the room and went to the shelf where she placed a small chest pertaining to Ochimizu. She drew out the chest which she kept quite deep from the surface, to hinder it from being found by Sano because she don't have anywhere else to hide it. And it's all thanks to Kimigiku for 'stealing' back her property from her brother's possession few weeks ago.

This Ochimizu, she don't know why but she have a really bad feeling about this. She opened the box and read one of the scroll Kimigiku had give her.

\_Ochimizu, the blood-red elixir is a very special potion, the ultimate medicine human had ever made, originated from the West, giving the user the ability of extreme regeneration up until the extent of healing fatal injuries, although they do have severe side effects.\_

"What on earth? What kind of medicine functioning in such way?" She murmured. She have once asked Sano about Ochimizu after he arrived few days ago but he refused to answer any of it. Even so, judging from his shocked response when he saw her transforming with those red scorching eyes and white snowy hair, she knew **\*\*that\*\*** was just how this Ochimizu affected on the consumer.

Right.

Another mysterious question that long haunted her since Sano had returned appeared.

Why did the form she had since she have the babies, suddenly ceased when Sano was with her?

Or more precisely when Sano had touched her?

Like Kimigiku said, her body probably was rejecting the baby. But why? Is it because of her 'oni' nature couldn't accept the foreign living in her body that originated from a human? So when Sano is with her, her body was relaxed because the 'owner' of the baby was there?

And after she had told him her true nature, he didn't ask anything any further. As though the subject is a mere 'how are you? I'm fine' conversation. No it's not. It is far more than that. But since he don't seemed to ask more, she'll just leave it at that.

Besides, she don't think that would affect her life, their current happy life in any way probable.

It doesn't matter anyway.

She don't want to have any relationship with her previous life.

Let the past rested along the path of time.

And let them build a new future, towards the yet unseen tomorrow.

She placed the scrolls back to its place and neatly kept them inside. She thought of manifesting her thought now in a piece of paper. She reached for a brush and a paper and write something on it. After a while of writing, she re-read each character and a genuine smile of serenity plastered on her face.

The chest was closed and was back to its earlier place before she closed the shelf. With a smile that she knew she hadn't have one before, even in her previous life, it had finally sketched on her face.

She stepped out of the room and closed the door.

\_Hitomi was my past,\_

\_Toshimi is my present,\_  
\_Together, Sano and I will build a new future,\_  
\_Towards the endless day tomorrow,\_  
\_Why bother to look at yesterday,\_  
\_If tomorrow the sun is still up there?\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Sano, you sure about this?"<p>

Right in the middle of the sea, the crew was struggling to pull out the giant net from the water up into the ship. Hundreds of fishes stucked everywhere between the nets and endlessly squirming, wordlessly saying they want to go back into the sea.

"About what?" Sano asked back between his pull of the net. Few other men was transferring the fishes into the huge pail when one of the fishes flew and kissed Shinpachi's face.

"MMHN!" The fish then dropped into the pail with a plop sound.

"Opps. Sorry there young man." A middle-aged man with a a piece of cloth wrapped around his head apologized with a toothy grin.

Shinpachi brushed off the kiss mark from the fish with his hand, face as bitter as the dying fish. "I'm okay. Don't worry."

"Yeah. Ya might even throw th'anchor t'him. He can catch it." Sano generously added, looking at Shinpachi's direction, only to meet his dumbfounded face as he tried to understand what he just said.

The old man laughed, "Sano-kun, it's good t'have ya back, really. Ya don't plan t'leave 'gain, ain't ya?" The thick accent of Yaeyama that flowed in the man's voice had deepened the furrow on Shinpachi's face. He didn't understand a thing except 'Sano-kun', 'good' and 'back'. Even the 'Sano-kun' sounded really strange in his ears.

Without a second hesitation, Sano nodded as he commanded for another net to be thrown into the sea, "I've already settle 'ere fer good. " he paused for emphasis, eyes scattered among the hundreds of fishes to find \_the one\_ that is edible for his wife but he found none, "Besides, when yer born in a family attached to th'sea, wieldin' a sword fer a year or two doesn't make ya a swordsman."

Shinpachi was left spellbounded.

The old man laugh grew louder, patting his back with his callus hand, a nearly overused hand that had spent nearly over twenty years on the sea, "Seimei-san would be mighty glad t'hear that from ya. Should we celebrate with a drink or two?"

"Celebrate?" He rubbed his itchless chin, "I'd love to but I can't.



My wife is waitin' fer me at home." He replied with a grin, hoping the old man who had long worked on their ship to understand his situation, and he know he would. Meanwhile, Shinpachi had started to admit to Sano's decision; to resign from holding the title of the Captain of The Tenth Division of the Roshigumi.

And he already did.

And here he thought he could change his mind if he followed him to his hometown, but to no avail; Sano is a man where his faith as firm as the adamant where no one could change him once he made up his mind.

And he need not to ask him any further. If that was his decision, as a friend, he'll respect it and support him in any way he could. Although he knew Sano won't need him in any way though. Except for dragging him to the sakÃ© house and drink into their hearts content into oblivion, until the extent they can take no more.

He threw his gaze to the vast sea where the colour of the sky had reflected upon it. Then the azure blue eyes landed on his hand on his side.

\_I can't forever hold a sword in this hand.\_

\_I need to move on too.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Y-you-" She stuttered when she finally recognized the man before her. The wild herbs in her hand fell down to the grass. She took a step back, he took a step forward. Every pace she thought was her life. Those single eye...<p>

It's inhuman.

The rattle of the twigs and small rustles of grass under their feet on the hill was unexpectedly loud under the swaying leaves of the trees. The wind was so hard she felt she can smell the scent of salt from where the winds blow.

"Are you scared of me?" He growled silently, his eyes caught the image of a helpless female goat, watching her death approaching her slowly, so slow she started to regret for being alive.

"Hitomi." His single-eye ravaged the swell of her tummy, assessing her for a moment before a slow dangerous smirk hovered over his face, "It seems it won't be long before I find \_him\_."

Cold sweat ran down her temple. Her hands were as cold as ice. The nerves in her body twitched uncontrollably.

She have met him before in one of the Asuka's top mission of 'cleansing' the traitors among the Asuka shinobi.

And he was one of them.

The resistance he showed during his capture was surprisingly strong and powerful, they can't deny the fact he was actually one of the Asuka superior but something had happened to him that cause him to

against their Master, Taiga. Few of Taka's men had sustained serious injuries in their battles with him then it all ended when one of Taka's man, Saizo volunteered himself to take him down.

And he did. When the battle ended, he had lost his left eye, body completely depleted of energy before he was arrested while Saizo, in the other hand, had a deep horizontal wound across his abdomen. Not more not less.

That was when he was promoted to be Taka's righthand-man.

Sensing the taut in her face, the smirk on him only grew wider as he approached for another step until she was trapped with a cliff on her back. Just one more step, she will meet her demise.

"Don't worry. I won't hurt you." There's only few meters separating both of them.

"What do you want from me?" She tried to sound stern but her the streak of panic on her face was so evident she thought he's going to laugh at her. Few pieces of soil under her feet had fall rolling down the cliff as she had reached the edge of the steep ground.

Seeing the kunoichi who once was known with her prowess in alchemy, who also rumoured to have a special relationship with his greatest enemy, Saizo was standing right in front of him; defenseless, had brought him to his first victory; to lure him out.

"Not much. Just please do me a favor,"

His hand reached out and pushed her shoulder.

The gravity took her, his one eye said its farewell through his glances, "Tell Saizo, I'm waiting for him."

\* \* \*

><p>After a long hours spending his time on the ship, which was rather long than usual, they finally disembark from the ship and returned home. After thanking his crew for their hardwork, Sano waited until they disappeared down the port before he joined Shinpachi on the wooden port. In his hand, there's a reward from the Kami for him-no, for Toshimi.<p>

A herring.

Where the probability in finding it in Ishigaki shore might achieve 1:1000. It was wrapped in a special paper to keep its freshness for few hours after the caught.

He took a glance to the end of the sea, where he and Sasuke had once thought in their childhood where the water of the sea would poured to the the other end where the world had ended on the line of the sea. Strange enough, but that's the power of child's imagination. The red horizon was sketched gloriously across the sky, signaling the time for the sun for the day had ended, changing its shift with the moon for the night will arrived in an hour.

There's nothing much to talk about with Shinpachi. He don't know why but somehow he felt a little bit...uneasy. As they walked on the

alley where the kids were still there playing, from afar, he saw a figure, a familiar figure was running from the end of the alley straight to them.

Seishuu.

"Sei? What's wrong with him?" Shinpachi asked.

Sano didn't answer, instead he took another few big steps to his running brother. As he was approaching, Sano narrowed his eyes on his usual maroon jinbei.

There's a several spots on his cloth that was darker than the original colour. The liquid was drawn into the dark color of the fabric.

Blood.

Seishuu arrived in front of them, panting hardly but he knew he don't have time for that, "Toshi-nee...she... had fall down the cliff. In..infirmary-"

Like grease lightning, Sano already dashed to the said place; infirmary. The wrapped herring plumped to the ground, left abandoned as Shinpachi and Seishuu followed him from behind with the almost same pace. The golden eyes wandered wildly to the infirmary's direction, step by expeditious step, the throb of his heart went berserk in each passing seconds.

**\*\*In the infirmary\*\***

"Toshi! Don't give up! Open yer eyes please!" For the countless time, Tohru had brushed Toshimi's cadaverous face with water, hoping to help her to stay awake. Her cries that were so...devastating and overwhelming in Tohru's and the midwives ears since two hours ago had ceased. She no longer have the energy to cry, let alone in clenching the sheets under her as she gave the last push for her baby - her lifeless baby to come out to the cruel world, not even have the chance to look at her mother.

HER mother.

The baby was a girl, but the midwife can't show her her dead baby. She just can't. She don't want her to wallow herself in despair for the moment where she have another one inside her womb. They need her to push for another one if she want to win this battle. This cruel battle.

A battle where there's only one side can live.

The mother.

Except when the mother choose to surrender and join her babies in demise.

Cry after encouraging cry, she was stilled on the sheets, unmoved. Eyes fluttering weakly, lips as dry as dust, the side of her forehead and her cheeks held the dry blood as they collided with small stones and dried leaves as she fell down the cliff. The sheets under her was flooded by enormous amount of blood. The light green yukata she wore

in the morning, where there were bamboo design printed on her downwaist yukata, was now had transformed into a bloody bamboos.

Toshimi felt someone squeezing her hand. She lifted her pupil to the direction. Her mother-in-law.

She was crying.

"Toshimi, hang on, my dear..." Her voice got stuck down her throat, "There's another one..."

A teardrop ran from the corner of her eyes, drenching the already soaked pillow under her head. She weakly shook her head. She never felt pain so overwhelming as this before. No matter how many times they encourage her, she knew her body more than anyone else.

As breathless the baby is, the baby lied motionless inside her, refusing to come out from the safe, warm confine of a mother's womb. She no longer have even a drop of energy to say her last word.

She knew she can't last long.

Her eyelids have gone heavier.

For a moment, she was imagining on how things suppose to be; when she's in labor, when the baby was safely delivered to the world, she would hear the most beautiful melody in the world; the cry from her baby.

But here she hear none.

Only a soft weeping from her mother-in-law with several faces shaking their heads in despair.

Let the tears speaks.

"Excuse me, is Toshimi-"

He froze on the spot.

His beloved wife whose in the day was craving for fish now had lied in the infirmary heavily bloodied. His eyes fastly attached to her bent legs, then to the small lifeless baby in the midwife's hands.

Miscarriage.

His feet, beyond his command had perched to his withering wife. Deep inside, the upheaval and turbulence in him was in uproar but his hands hold hers ever-so-gently he thought she could break if he hold her any harder.

Her exhausted eyes lifted to him, she bit her trembling lips when she saw tears had filled the rim of his eyes.

"I'm sorry... I lost it..."

Two drops of tears had escaped their eyes.

Let the tears speaks.

**\*\*End of chapter 17\*\***

**\*\*Thanks guys for putting up with me since the first chapter :) wish you have a great holiday and a Happy New Year! Please keep on supporting by reading and reviewing okay? Although when I know you're reading this is a bless for me. =^\_ ^=\*\***

**\*\*Thanks for reading :D\*\***

## 18. Torment of Sorrow

It have been three days since that unfortunate event befall on Harada's family, the long awaited joy to welcome the new member suddenly dwindled, it had flew away with the unwelcomed ravaging typhoon racking the houses and small fragile building of the village. The wind was violent, rocking the trees back and forth, almost pulling out the roots from its stands as it blew on their way.

The sky was dark, the clouds, in the other hand had sent a seemingly bad news to the land beneath it; they seemed so full, ready to flood the earth below with enormous rain and blend them together with a fast rush of wind before they descended on the already deluged soil. The wind chime at the doorfront was swaying harshly, following accordingly every vectors of the maddening wind.

They had stayed together in the main hall. The lanterns, which were the only one lightened the dark room had slowly reduced one by one. Until there's only one left. Naru was struggling to protect the lanterns from blowing to the phantom wind after her numerous attempt of lighten the already dead lantern proved to be pointless.

Sound of puddles at the yard behind the closed doors being stepped on was visible in their ears despite of the relentless rhythm of the crying sky. A drenched hand opened the heavy glass door, the special doors which they used everytime the weather went bad, namely in these few days where climate was changing. They took off the drenching raincoat from their body. Apparently, the raincoat had made a bad job in protecting the wearers from the rain where there's waters trickling all over to the wooden floor from both them and the raincoats.

"How was it, Sanosuke?" His father who was sitting comfortably on the seat cushion with his hands crossed over his chest, eyes closed as if reading the unpredictable weather of when it'll end its uproar.

Sano in the other hand was eying the dim hall when he didn't find even a glance of \_her.\_ Reluctantly, he turned to his father as he answered, "We couldn't save several boats from bein' carried away to th'sea. The wind was so hard we didn't manage t'moor it to th'dock. Apart from that, Panchi and his family were shelterin' under Kudo's residence so there might be no problem regardin' th'villagers." He concluded their an hour and a half 'tour' throughout the villagers right before the storm started with a single breath.

Seishuu already went to Naru to help her lighten the dead lanterns back to life. Shinpachi, which had missed his sail back to Kyoto when the storm striked the village, had assist Sano to take a quick patrol

around the port and the town. He'd rather have his pocket deserted for few months for returning late to headquarters than risking his life in the thunderous sea where he could drawn into the dark sea forever, graveless. He went to Naru and Seishuu before he heard Sano ask his mother.

"Mother, where's Toshimi?"

The mother threw a worried gaze towards the door adjoined to hallway inside of the residence before they shifted to Sano's anxious visage, "I'm actually was waitin' fer her too. She said she wanted to go the bathroom but it almost ten minutes now. I think ya should go an' take a look at 'er."

\_Again?\_

His brows wrinkled, remembering how she always locked herself up in the bathroom since...since that unceremonious event happened on her. On them. At first he thought maybe she needed some personal time alone to manage herself but to his arousing curiosity, everytime she gone out of the bathroom, her face was frail and sickly as though something terrible had happened to her while she's inside. He can't let anything worse happened to her again. Not anymore. Deep down, he knew she was crying her heart out when she's alone. There's not even once she shed a tear when he was around. Except when the time he first arrived and saw her in the infirmary, extremely exhausted.

He wanted her to cry. Because he knew she was keeping it inside. He wanted to be the one to brush off those tears and give her a shoulder to cry on. He don't want her to wallow herself in sorrow and grief by herself. She's not alone and he wanted her to know that. More importantly, he don't want to lose more than he already did.

Because he had the feeling he was going to lose her anytime soon if he let her all alone most of the time.

He remembered talking to Hokuto about this.

\_"Sano, how's yer wife?" Hokuto asked him one time a day after she had her miscarriage.\_

\_"She's fine... I thought." He murmured at the end, unsure of how to say about her 'seemingly' fine now.\_

\_Hokuto huffed, a one-sided smile lingered, a bitter one, "I don't know about Toshimi-san but... If that thing ever happen to Tohru, I know she won't be just fine."\_

\_He arched a brow, questioning, "What are yer tryin' t'say?"\_

\_Ignoring his friend's inquiry, he moved on, "When Haru was about three months old, he had a sudden hot fever and hadn't recover about three days. He never stop cryin' during the day. Also throughout the night."\_

\_"Then?" Sano egged him on when he suddenly stopped. He don't know what was he trying to tell him, although actually he thought he wanted to run back home to see whether Toshimi is alright when the subject was brought up but he'll just hear him anyway. \_

\_He chuckled suddenly, "I don't know why I'm tellin' ya this but-" he blinked few times, as though regaining his composure, then he exhaled, "Ya know, when the baby they had in their wombs for nine months, be it eight months or six months, when suddenly the baby fell sick and go on crying all the time non-stop, they too, will cry ya know, not knowing what to do to soothe their child."\_

\_When the baby cry, they cry too.\_

\_But when the baby die, they...\_

\_"Part of her was dead." He suddenly realized that subconsciously, voicing his thought out loud.\_

"I'll go check on 'er." With that, he disappeared behind the shoji door and quickly make haste to his taciturn crying-wife.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Edo.<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>The young lady was sweeping the yard with the hand-made broom when suddenly she heard a dull thud at the alley just in front of her house. She left the broom, let it lean on the stone wall of the gate before she peeked to the alley.<p>

There's a man with a round straw-hat clad in black jinbei had collapsed on the ground.

"Oh no! Mister are you alright?" She perched on the man's side, crouching but dare not to touch him.

Taka remained immobilized with his face kissing the ground. He wanted to stand on his feet and say he was alright but the pain on his back was so overwhelming he couldn't even move an inch for a moment, knowing that \_thing\_ was consuming his entire body.

The honey-coloured eyes shifted on the moving black marks on his clutching hands just at the side of his concealed head under the hat. The marks was moving, as if retreating back into his body the second she blinked her eyes to look back on them. Her eyes widened in shock. His hands had returned to normal. She never saw anything like that before but judging from the man's frame, he's certainly was one of hundreds travelers wandering from place to place across the land. She made no delay in taking the man's hand and supported half of his weight with her petite body with all her might before she brought him into the house.

She let her sit on the yard before she make haste to the kitchen to fetch the man some water. Clearly, the man was exhausted judging from his half-lidded eyes with that dried lips. Taka made himself comfortable on the simple cushion under him as he take off the hat and put it on his side. He cracked his neck to the right then left, yielding a loud cracking sound of his stiff bones.

\_Darn it. Another unproductive day.\_

He decided to stay at the house's yard for a moment before he say his thank to the girl that he haven't seen her face yet.

\_Thank? For what? \_

Then the girl returned with a tray in her hands. As she knelt down near him, he saw a cup of green tea with another cup of mineral water and a few steamed buns.

A small colour of happiness tinted on his face.

"Thank you for the drink." He took the glass of water and downed it in one shot.

\_Another free meals.\_

She watched the man eat with a vigorous pace. She poured another cup of water into his glass as soon as he finished the cup with the tea. This might not be the time for her to ask if he was alright. Or probably he collapsed because had not have food for couple of hours. Or probably for days.

\_But what was that black mark just now?\_

"Em... Mister, are you alright?" She was hesitant at first but she asked him anyway.

Taka, who was almost consumed with his lusts over food suddenly choked when he heard the girl's voice. Don't know what to do, and feeling awfully guilty for disturbing the man having his meal, she poured another cup of tea into his cup with an exteremely worried face.

He coughed few times as he recovered. He took the tea cup and downed it, but slowly this time, as though to savor the bitter-sweet taste of the tea.

\_Edo woman's tea is worth to die for, \_he thought with a sly smirk.

He put down the cup and shifted his body slightly to the girl, or probably a young woman who was sitting behind him politely. His raven eyes grazed her face before he gave her a wide grin as he bowed slightly, "Thank you again for the food, Hime-sama."

The restlessness in her returned. Feeling her cheeks slightly hot under that man's gaze, she averted her eyes from him. She thought probably the man was teasing him a bit for lighten the awkward atmosphere between them.

"Emm... Are you feeling alright now? Do you need any medicine for your fatigue?"

It surprised him for the girl in front of him was asking him for any sort of medicine for his evident exhaustion on his face, "If you don't mind, do you have one?"

The young woman promptly almost jumped from her seat as she nodded but he strained her from leaving. Grinning, he said, "It doesn't matter. I'm just asking by the way... Hime-sama."



His words 'Hime-sama' had casted her cheeks crimson again. She don't know why but the way he pronounced it, it almost sounded sincere and genuine, made her wonder if the man had his way with women with his husky voice complemented with that handsome face. She dropped her head a bit, "Please don't call me that. I thought you need one so I can fetch one from my father's hand-made medicine." Indirectly saying her father was a doctor.

Then she heard him huffed amusedly, "I don't need your father's medicine but... May I have another cup of your palatable tea if you don't mind?" He handed her his cup while she pleasantly poured him the tea. With a happy face, he took another sip.

She don't know why but somehow his presence-this unknown man's presence had made her feel happily occupied with his company. She knew the man wasn't a man with bad intentions. There's no way he could with that genuinely bright face downing the tea she made. Or it was probably her imagination as her past experience speaks she don't have that many experience in conversing with the opposite sex. Clearly, spending her time alone in the house when her father was away since few months ago for work had made her sometimes even talking to herself.

He threw his eyes over the yard and the house before he speaks, "So, Hime-sama-

She cut him, "Chizuru. Yukimura Chizuru. You can call me Chizuru." She said softly with her small voice.

He contemplated her words for a while before the grin in his face returned, "I knew that. Even so..." He shrugged off her remarks like the passing wind swaying his red auburn hair. "You're still a princess to me. Saving me from my nearly dying thirst and hunger. I owed you one."

To add to her embarrassment, he deliberately winked his eye to her. She was bereft of words. She hate to admit but she actually had enjoyed his company. He took his time to properly scrutinize her face before a sudden realization kicked in.

\_She resembled her a lot.\_

"You're all alone in the house?" He broke the silence among them, taking another bite of the red bean bun. As though being shake off from her headtrip, she stammered, "Eh? I-I'm sorry. I didn't-"

Taking the last bite of the bun, he munched eagerly before he swallowed the last bite. Standing on his feet he took the straw hat back on top of his head. She was startled again when she saw him bowed his head to her. She hastily rolled to her feet.

"You're leaving?" She asked, unaware of the tone of her voice had a hint of desperate in it.

He simply nodded, "I shall take my leave now. It's indecent if someone sees a stranger like me in a house alone with a woman. Besides, Chizuru-hime," He had tone down his voice to a pleasant one, "Offering drinks and foods for strangers can be quite dangerous, you

know. Especially one with blonde hair and with red eyes."

The casual way he talked had cracked a laugh from her. She really was amused by his brief company and the laugh hadn't ceased just yet. She can't imagine meeting a person with blond hair on this land. She hadn't meet one. And she bet she would. The joke of his was too much for her to handle.

When she had recovered from her laugh, "I'll try to remember that."

"'Course you should." He replied, half-serious. With a contented face, he turned away and started to head to the front gate. Chizuru ran to her slippers before he joined him at the gate. He turned to her, gazing on her face lightly, "When we meet again, I'll pay back the kindness I owed you."

Instead with words, she replied him with a wide smile, fathoming that simple word of him, the silent promise they held, saying they will meet again someday. She raised her arm and waved to him, although she knew he won't see them, when he was slowly disappeared at the end of the alley and take a turn to the right street adjoined to general street straight to the main town.

Chizuru exhaled a breath, the previous smile still hovered on her face before she suddenly gasped sharply, "I forgot to ask him his name."

\* \* \*

><p>She swallowed the bitter gall surfacing at the base of her throat. One hand clutch on the fabric on her left chest, trying to suppress the pain back into its place. The crimson eyes drawn to her long hair that had turned white alabaster along her chest to her waist. Her back rested on the door of the bathroom. She took a glance to the knob to make sure it was locked and it did. Thunders and lightning had long accompanied her in her fight with the pain. Her eyes drifted close, back of her head rested on the wooden door, trying to easen the fast pulse of her chest.<p>

\_"How can a monster like you contently living among the humans?"\_

She felt something burnt on her back. The mark.

\_"You have made a wrong choice blending yourself with them."\_

She arched her back silently when the burn sting suddenly became unbearable.

\_"No matter where you go, your past history will keep haunting you."\_

One by one, the words from the one-eyed man came and haunted her from deep in the core. She wrapped herself with her arms, trying to soothe herself, one hand crossed to her shoulder while the other lingered to her now flat womb. She cried.

Silently.

The sore between her legs had never greet her again since she lost them from the safe comfort of her womb. She cried. Because she didn't feel that pain. As though her babies she held within her since six months ago was brushed off like some indifferent withering leaf swayed by the gust of wind.

And that was what hurt her the most.

She bit her trembling lips whe she heard footstep far from the end of the hallway as they slowly becoming louder on her ears. She knew whose footsteps is that.

Sano.

He had been endlessly patient with her unreadable behaviour lately and on one side, deep down her core she felt...

Relieved.

His presence alone is all she need. There's no need of words and warming touch. There's no more need of all that. Even they were separated by a piece of wooden door, she can felt the warm presence just behind her. The pain in her chest had subsided. She had experimented this few times and her hair and eyes only came back to normal when he was there.

And that was what she didn't understand.

Why do you still having this effect on me although I no longer have the baby?\_

Sano had knocked the door few times but there still wasn't any answer from her. He called for her again. He needed to see her. He needed to be with her. He have to be with her.

"Toshimi, open this door please."

**\*\*End of chapter 18\*\***

## 19. Stripping Your Defenses

He stared at the door for another seconds before he heard the sound of the water rushed out from the pipe before it closed back with a haste of speed. He waited for another second when he was expecting her to come out when the water pipe was closed but the door remained unopen.

Thud!

"Toshimi you alright?! Open the door!" A hard crashing sound echoed from inside of the closed door, as though something hard had hit the floor. Sano's hand quickly latched to the knob and rummaged through it couple times but they just won't open. He was running out of patience as the seconds passed by and he had started to slam the door with his well-built shoulder when the knob suddenly clicked from inside.

Toshimi appeared on the doorway, her face twitching slightly in pain, right hand was placed on top of her forehead.

"Sorry...to keep you waiting..." She moved aside as she spoke, eyes averted from him. She thought he had waited long enough to enter the bathroom and she had made him wait outside for quite a while.

"What are you-" He halted the moment he noticed her red nose and eyes before he moved upward only to see she was pressing her palm to her concealed forehead.

"Did you fall in there?" A pair of concerned golden orbs grazed her pale face then shifted to her concealed forehead, "Let me take a look."

She quickly hid her face from his searching hand, "I'm okay. Just a slight bump I guess." She tried to reason but her face was saying otherwise when she accidentally pressed her palm on the swelled skin. It takes him a moment to realize how vulnerable she looks; her nose and cheeks tinted red and just how much fool she had thought of him, those faces can never lie to him. He clenched his jaws inwardly, furious coursing throughout his veins at the thought he had left her all alone facing the aftermath of their loss.

She carefully lifted her eyes to him when he didn't say a word, "So you don't want to enter the bathroom-"

"You cried."

Her breath halted, her heart throbbed. Tears began to well in her eyes again so she just looked down on his black jinbei and tried to swallow the tears as she blinked her eyes in her futile attempt to hide them. But one of the precious tears had escaped the fragile dam.

His fingers enveloped her chin and lifted her face, "Look at me." He saw the tears staining her cheek, she bit her lower lip to contain the cry, the dimples he always loved to see everytime she smiled now had appeared when she was shattering to pieces, sending a prick of pain deep down his core. And now it was his duty to pick up those pieces and rearrange them back to its original place.

"I'm sorry," She wiped off the tears with her fingers but Sano was faster than her, his thumb lingered on her cheek, keeping it there when she tried to wriggle away.

"Why are you apologizing?" He asked softly.

As though unable to stand his piercing gaze that was denuding each layer she placed behind her true emotion, she simply shook her head as her hand continued to press on her bruise, but more firmly than before, "This," she pointed to her covered forehead, "It hurt so much... That's why..."

He couldn't stand the fact that she was still trying to hide her misery from him and chose to swallow it all by herself. It pained him deep inside but he knew it was his obligation to be by her side and lend her the strength for her to stand back up on her feet. And he knew it would take her a long period of time before she completely recovered. Because even until the end of the time, he can never understand a mother-to-be's pain of suddenly losing her baby after

being with them for months.

He effortlessly scooped her off the floor into his arms, carrying her bridal-style, "Let's go to the room. You'll need some distraction. And some ointment." He referred to the now exposed bruise on the top of her forehead.

At the moment, she was just staring blankly to the disheveled fabric on his broad chest before she leaned her head comfortably against it, closing her wet eyes. Her head started to spin as the aftereffect of her fall in the bathroom earlier.

He looked down upon his now delicate wife, his own spirit sank as he watched her frail face but he revived it back on as he hauled her higher in his arms, bringing her head rested on his sturdy shoulder, so near with his jaw.

The sky was starting to stop its pours although the cold breeze was still there, gently swaying the leaves back and forth and bring down the rainwater trickling down on the edge of the stem, forming a ripple on the countless puddles on the soil.

"Toshimi..." He whispered between his big stride to their room, noticing her absence of sound.

"Hmm?" She replied softly with her eyes still closed. His hand opened the door of their room and stepped in before he closed back the door. Guilty washed over him when he saw she was frowning in his arms, "Does it hurt that bad?" He knew she got the bruise because she was rushing out to him, but his care for her was so exquisite he'd never intended to hurt her.

He settled her on his lap as he reached for the oil bottle she specially made for bruises and cuts on the shelf, the one that had assisted the fellow swordsmen of the Shieikan dojo in handling light wound and bruises as the result of their training, including Sano himself during her days as the temporary infirmary attendant at the dojo.

She opened her eyes when she felt his gentle fingers applying oil on her bruise. Her eyes gazed all over his focused face although the distance between them was so small she can actually feel the warm breath from him. He blew slightly on the bruise as he finished attending it, "Feeling better?" He watched her nodded lightly as she forced a smile on her face.

"Does it still hurt down there?" He asked again, but this time keeping her eyes on him, he cupped her face with his hand, keeping her close. She simply shook her head. Although he just asked her a very intimate yet delicate question, she answered him anyway, "Just a little."

He watched her in a heartbeat before he bumped his forehead with her but careful enough not to touch the bruise, he whispered, "Now tell me."

She pretended to not know what was he asking, "Tell you what?" She felt his hands wandered on her back before they shackled on the curves of her waist that had returned since she lost the babies.

"Tell me what you feel." Again, he brushed off the tears tainting her cheeks with his thumb. "Tell me what each of these tears mean. Share with me your pain. Although I'll never understand the pain you had suffered, but I'll always come to your rescue. I loathe myself for not realizing this sooner and let you all alone. But I can't afford to lose you as well... That's why... So tell me..."

She saw his jaw clenching again as the veins in his skin imitating the pulsing bone inside it. She touched them, his jaw, in hope it will soothe the turmoil they contained. Her tears now were relentless, fading her vision, "Sano... I'm sorry..."

He hushed her, "Don't apologize, Toshimi. It's not your fault-"

"It's my fault," she interjected him, "I lost them because... I'm \_me\_. I'm a-" He brought her to his embrace, muffling her remarks on his shoulder. He whispered all soothing words he ever knew to her ears with his hands stroking her hair and her back. She sobbed and cried in the enfold of his arms, his whispers became inaudible as her soft sob overpowered her being, even when she thought she heard him said something like, 'he's no more' or 'he can't hurt you anymore', she knew she had misheard him.

"Sano..." She said between her sobs after awhile crying her heart out in his arms.

"Hmm?"

"What if... I can't get pregnant again...?" Just thinking about that thought had made her burst into cry again. He brought her in front of him, wiping her tears before he sensed a big damp spot on the black fabric on his right shoulder. He huffed amusedly, "What am I going to do with you, crybaby? You cried way too much." Seeing she won't get any better with just counting her tears, he decided to show her the another way he knew to soothe a damsel in distress. Although he never tried it before. But in this case, it's all about comforting his woman. His wife. He can do anything he think will please her.

"I shall keep you distracted."

He pushed her gently to the back until her back met the tatami-matted floor, pinning her hands on each sides of her head, towering her from above, "You don't have to worry about getting you pregnant again. We still have countless of night sessions ahead of us." He said plainly but the smile on his face held a very significant meaning.

The wet violet eyes blinked in bafflement, utterly forgot about her cry, "Wait-I don't mean it that way..."

She blushed even deeper when Sano descended to the crook of her neck. His red hair caressing her easily-tickled ear, making her turn slightly to his invasion. She don't have any idea on what did he wanted to do to her but then he nibbled on the skin under her left ear before he earned a gasp from her as he bite and suck the skin, making a bright red hickey on the white canvas of her neck, finally giving her the idea on what would happen on her skin eventually. And on her appearance in front of the other family members.

"No-no.. Sano, if you do that-"

"You can't get out of the room?" He paused for emphasis.  
"Unfortunately, that is my true intention." Sano generously provided the rest as he was working for the next love bite.

"You're so mean." She said with a low voice.

The next instant she heard him chuckle, "Am I?" He sniggered, "Probably. But only to you though." He paused deliberately, waiting for her response but when she said nothing, he moved upward to face her, his expression changed, "Toshimi, do you want to see me lock myself in the bathroom and cry there alone?" He asked softly but the pain it held in his words were manifested on his straight face.

It was hard. For her. But he have to say it nonetheless if he don't want to lose her.

She gulped when the subject was brought up again. But now she realized the feeling he held when he saw her crying face everytime she left the bathroom when he asked her that. It pained him as well. Slowly but surely, she shook her head.

His gaze soften, "Of course you don't want it. Neither do I. So that's why," he nuzzled on the love bites he just made on her neck, "I'm latching you in our room until your tears run dry. Fair enough?"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Later at night<strong>

"Sano ji-chan!" From afar, he could hear his niece's voice calling for him. He turned from his way to his room with a tray in his hands. Naru ran and ran until she arrived in front him, panting, her hands on her knees.

"What's wrong, Naru? Did somethin' happen?" Sano asked out of concern.

Panted, "Toshi-nee... Is she not well?"

"Ahh... Toshi-nee?" He rubbed the back of his head, uncertain, "Apparently it seems so."

She tilted her head, "Ape-per-ant-li? Oh! Actually..." She suddenly cried out of realization but then trailed off.

His brow lifted one-sided, waiting for her to continue, but when she didn't, but instead making a suspense face, he sighed, "Naru, I'm goin' to bring this meal to Toshi-nee first, then-" He stopped when suddenly Shinpachi appeared from the end of the hallway. But with an extremely red face.

"And what is wrong with you, Shinpachi?" He frowned when Shinpachi approached them like a drunk fellow, except he wasn't hiccuping. If he is, then he had perfectly matching the figure in his head.

Shinpachi suddenly facepalming, "I-I... My heart has been stolen!"

It annoyed him, and Naru to see a big strong guy like him facepalming like a shy girl being proposed.

Still covering his face, "When I asked her 'where are you from?', she said 'I came from the empty void of your heart.' then-" He wanted to continue his babbling but Sano cut him.

"What are you talking about? And do you really have to tell me that?" He chided.

"...she has a sweet beauty mark under her right eye.. Oh! Should I ask her this; does it hurt when you fall from the heaven?"

After awhile babbling, Naru poked his waist, "Ji-chan, Sano ji-chan already went to his room." Shinpachi uncovered his face before he saw Sano was not in front of him anymore.

As though being shaken back to reality, he whirled to Naru, "Naru, did I said anything weird?"

She hmmm before she shook her head, "Nope. Yer said yer heart is empty and has been sold when someone said, does it pretty when it's fall in heaven?" She said matter-of-factly.

His frown deepened, "Did I really...said that?"

**\*\*In Sano and Toshimi's room\*\***

She turned her head from the letter she has been writing since half an hour ago to the door when she heard his footstep. He stepped in and lowered the tray on to the low table.

"What's with the commotion? I thought I heard Shinpachi and Naru's voice outside." She asked as she put down the brush on the ink stone.

Sano made his way back to the door, "Yes, they are. I'll go check on them. Go have your dinner first. I'll come back - where are you going?" He asked when she suddenly rolled to her feet and approached the door.

She simply blinked her eyes, "I wanted to see them too."

He huffed, giving her a side-way glance, "Very well. But make sure to provide an answer if someone sees those." His eyes pointed to her neck covered with hickeys. She instinctively covered them with her hand. She swore she saw his grinning face while shaking his head unbelievably as he stood outside and closed the door of the room.

**\*\*At the main room\*\***

There were two ladies sitting on the seat cushion in the main room. One of the lady bear a long black hair down her waist while the other has a short brown hair to her shoulder, complemented with two tied hair on each side of her face that were longer than the other.



"So is Hito-Toshimi's here?" The lady with the long black hair asked the blushing Shinpachi who was sitting uncomfortably across her. At first he thought he could accompany the guest of the house when Sano was nowhere to be found before Naru found him walking to his room but here...

"So errr... Kimigiku-san," he asked but only to found himself stuttered everytime he looked on her face.

"Yes, Shinpachi-san?" She was quite amused by his reaction so she decided to play along.

Shinpachi cleared his throat when he heard her soft voice saying his first name, "So you err...a friend of Toshimi?"

Kimigiku nodded in assent, "Yes. She is my friend. A good friend of mine." She answered while Sen-hime watching amusedly her guardian's way of speaking. There's always this one thing that amazed her about Kimigiku. She don't know if she realized this but the way she speaks may entice any man into liking her, or even fall for her. But this time, the man in front of them had fall for her way too easy.

The door of the room adjoined to the hallway was opened.

The three pairs of eyes shifted to the man standing with wide eyes at the door.

"Ah. Sa-" Kimigiku suddenly halted, clearing her throat slightly before she resumed, "Sanosuke-san. It's very nice to meet you."

**\*\*End of chapter 19\*\***

Wow! I feel especially excited about this chapter. For the first part \*clearing my throat\* I'm sorry for any explicit mushiness but hehe I love it anyway ï¼¼(ï¿½â-½ï¿½)ï¼• and for the second part, I've decided to add another pair in the story and that is Kimigiku x Shinpachi ï¼¼(ï¼¾â-½ï¼¾)ï¼• I believe they would make a very interesting pair and I really wanted to try writing their progressing relationship. So stay tuned and don't forget to review!

Thanks for reading ^^

End  
file.